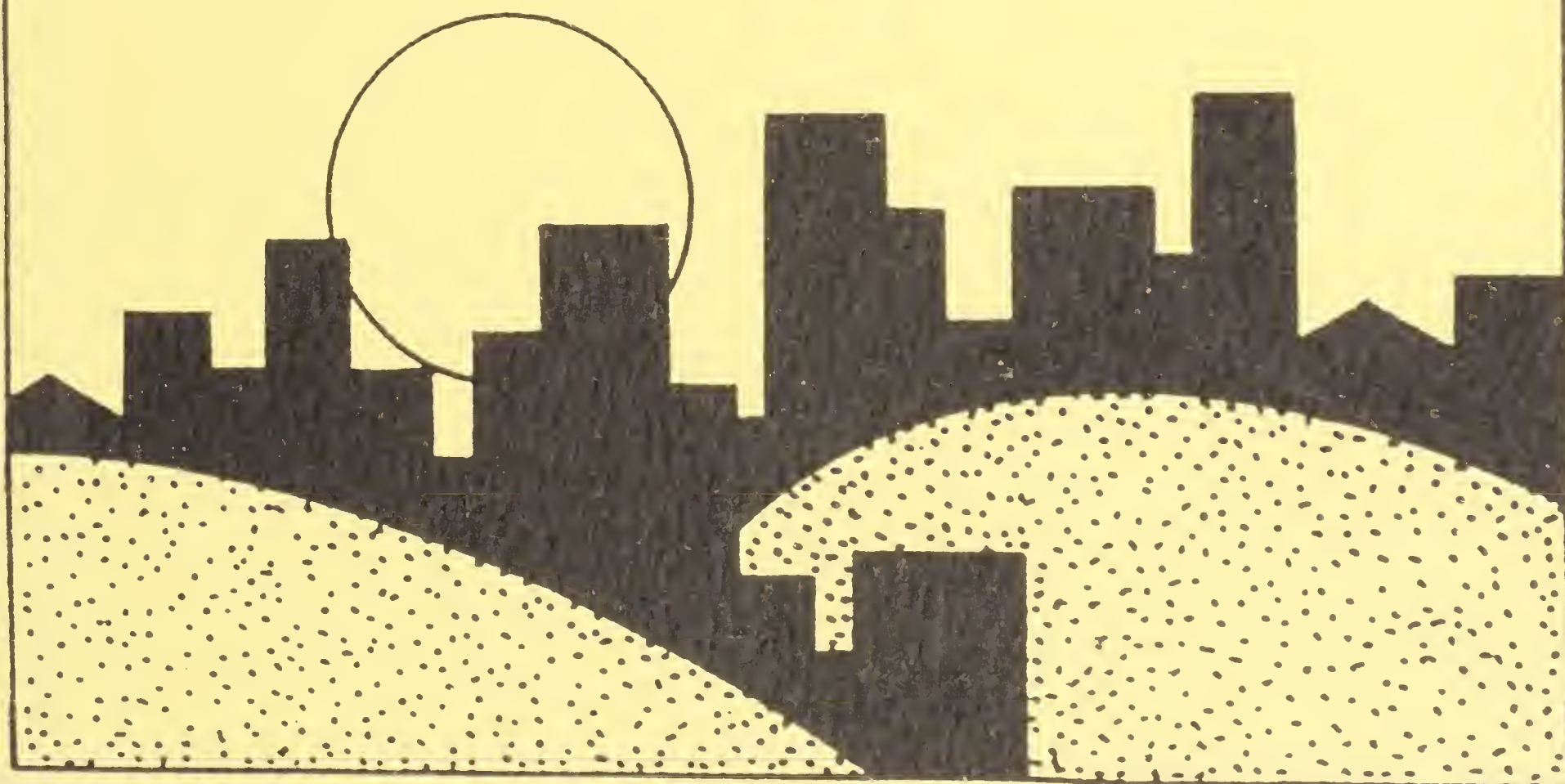


**‘To Market! To Market!’  
The Changing Role of the Australian Timber Merchant,  
1945 - 1965**

**Richard Harris**

Urban Research Program  
Working Paper No.62  
April 1998



**URBAN RESEARCH PROGRAM  
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**



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*Series Editor:*  
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## ABSTRACT

*Australian timber merchants have long played a vital role in providing building materials, credit, and product information to builders. A variety of sources, notably the merchant's national trade journal, indicate that after the Second World War they slowly responded to the growing demand from owner-builders and Do-It-Yourself enthusiasts, many of whom were women. They began to stock a wider variety of lines, built and improved showroom displays, adopted new marketing techniques, and offered consumer credit. By comparison with their North American counterparts, the lumber dealers, timber merchants were slow to meet the needs of new consumers. For several years, close financial ties with small mills encouraged them to identify with the timber trade and discouraged them from stocking timber 'substitutes'. When, after the mid-1950s, they offered new materials and services, they helped not only DIY-ers but also small builders who were facing increasing competition from large builder-developers.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AHB:	Australian Home Beautiful
AHG:	Australian House and Garden
ATJ:	Australian Timber Journal
ATJ&BPM:	Australian Timber Journal and Building Products Merchandiser





# ‘TO MARKET! TO MARKET!': THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN TIMBER MERCHANT, 1945-1965

Richard Harris\*

If the building industry is different from other industries that difference will be reflected in the enterprises that dominate it.

Michael Ball, *Rebuilding Construction*, 1988

Since the last world war, few businesses have had to adjust to such radical changes as the retail timber business

Con Lembke, *Australian Timber Journal*, 1962,  
adapted from Canadian Western Lumber Co

Good-oh. The Yanks can do it. We'll have a go at it too

Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 1964

The Australian timber merchant may seem a dull fellow. He performs a basic service, necessary but unobtrusive: not the stuff of myth. In the early postwar era he had a reputation for being as conservative in his business practices as in his politics. He was not numerous, at least by comparison with his builder-customers, and he left no obvious mark. Why not take it for granted that he did his job, and leave it at that?

In part the timber merchant, like the building industry as a whole, has been badly misunderstood. The ‘backward’ industry, with its ‘conservative’ enterprises, is a fiction. It underwent steady, and cumulatively major, change after 1945, and timber merchants played a large role in this. They did so precisely because they were small in number and better-capitalised than most of their customers, and many of their sawmill suppliers. If Australian merchants were slower to change than their Canadian and U.S. counterparts, the lumber dealers, this says something about Australian business and consumer culture in that era. Arguably, it says much more about the distinctive character and organization of the building industry. It turns out that the timber merchant mattered quite a lot. His story — and, as I will show, it came to matter that it was a story of men — throws new light on the particular way in which Australians realised their dreams in the postwar era.

In this paper I trace the changing nature and significance of the Australian timber merchant in the postwar period. In particular I focus on the two decades after 1945, for they were formative. This was a very dynamic period for the building industry. A lot of houses were built and, more importantly, many innovations were made in building materials and methods. The timber trade was increasingly threatened by wood ‘substitutes’, such as asbestos cement (‘fibro’). The building industry adopted power tools

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and eventually pre-cutting, including roof trusses; large builders became more common, and subcontracting ubiquitous; at the same time the growth of owner-building by amateurs introduced a new element on the building scene. The timber merchant was affected by, and in turn influenced, these developments. Having sketched his role at the beginning of the period, both in theoretical terms (section 1) and also with specific reference to Australia (section 2), I examine the changes that most directly affected him (section 3), the nature of his response both to commercial builders (section 4) and to the new consumer market (section 5), and finally the impact of his initiatives (section 6).

Throughout the period in question, those associated with the Australian building industry were regularly compared with their North American counterparts. Typically, they were found wanting, and were exhorted to adopt more efficient American methods (Australian Building Industry Productivity Team 1955). At first, timber merchants were not much affected by such comparisons. When, however, through the efforts of Con Lembke, editor of *The Australian Timber Journal*, they were introduced to Canadian and U.S. methods in the lumber trade, the effects were significant. North American comparisons are therefore an instructive counterpoint to the story of the Australian timber merchant.<sup>1</sup> Drawing together such comparisons, in the conclusion I suggest what the experience of timber merchants tells us about the specific character of the Australian building industry, and what the Australian experience in turn might suggest in broader terms about the nature of the building supply dealer.

## 1 The Timber Merchant in a Theoretical Context

The significance of the timber merchant derives from his role within the building industry. Beyond the obvious fact that he buys timber, from sawmillers or wholesalers, and then sells it to builders, we do not know much about the nature of this role. Very little has been written about him, about building supply dealers in general, or indeed about the overall organization of the housebuilding industry. Since both popular and academic conceptions of the building industry are sketchy, and poorly grounded in conceptual terms, it is useful to establish some broader points of reference.

### *The residential construction industry*

In part our ignorance about timber merchants reflects the fact that writers and academics have given little serious thought to the residential construction industry as a whole. The situation in Australia is fairly typical. Here, in a recent survey, Paris (1993: x; 131-2) has pointed out that the production of housing has received little attention, except from those who have documented

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1 Usually, for comparative purposes, observers made reference to the United States. There was little difference between the business practises of U.S. and Canadian lumber dealers, however, and in the timber trade the Canadian experience loomed relatively large. For these reasons, I refer to the experience of both the United States and Canada as distinctively 'North American'.



and analysed aggregate output. This lack of interest has in part reflected a policy bias towards the demand side of the housing market (Campbell 1991). Recent work, however, has begun to redress this balance. Drawing together the results of published and fugitive research Greig (1992; 1995; 1997), in particular, has sketched the changing outlines of the industry in the postwar period. Although Greig's survey does not refer specifically to the building supply dealer, it does provide a valuable frame of reference and point of departure.

Greig follows Michael Ball (1988) in questioning the way that most other observers have interpreted the building industry as 'backward'. For much of the past century, housing experts and policy-makers have regularly criticised the industry for being inefficient and slow to innovate. Since the 1920s, they have made unfavourable comparisons, in particular, with auto assembly, and have often suggested that house construction should move off-site to the factory floor. This mode of criticism reached a crescendo in the United States during the 1940s, when the federal government invested millions of dollars in various experiments to build prefabricated housing from wood, steel, or concrete. Such criticism was routine in Australia. Thus, writing in the *Economic Record*, Downing (1948: 76) observed that 'the [housing] industry has never been subject to the sort of revolution in methods which has applied to practically every other industry'. Adopting a more restrained line of argument than many others, rather than advocating wholesale prefabrication he merely suggested the need for 'efficient factory production' of 'highly standardised sub-assemblies' (Downing 1948: 78-79). More than a decade later Winston (1962: 56) developed the same arguments and used what had become the standard point of reference:

compared with the improvements in most fields of technology — in things like motor cars, radiograms or aircraft — the slowness, high costs and inefficiency of normal house production is something that we should all be ashamed of.

In the 1940s the Commonwealth government shared the critical views of housing experts, and made various efforts to promote industry efficiency. During the War, the Commonwealth Housing Commission suggested that bulk-buying and factory production by the government might create the necessary pressures for rationalisation (Howard 1987: 18). After the War, State Housing Commissions encouraged the growth of large builders, together with supposedly more efficient, mass methods of production, through their power to award building contracts on Commission projects (Garden 1992: 68-73, 87-89; Hollander 1996: 91; Marsden 1986: 56-9, 95-7). Faced with a severe postwar housing shortage, the government's concerns about efficiency persisted. They were the focus of the deliberations of the Building Research and Development Advisory Committee, which brought together representatives of the government, construction industry, and building trades. At its seventh meeting in December 1952, for example, this committee heard an eloquent presentation on efficiency from its building industry representative, A.V. Jennings ('Standardised Building Methods...';

cf. Jennings 1974). Except through Housing Commission contracts, however, governmental initiatives probably had little effect. Reviewing state activity with respect to the building industry over the period 1939-1952, Howard (1987: 54) has concluded that such 're-adjustment and re-organisation' as did occur was 'basically on terms set by the industry'. This is consistent with recent suggestions that the boom in homeownership, perhaps the most significant aspect of the period from the consumer's point of view, was a result of market forces, not a policy achievement (Bourassa, Greig, and Troy 1995).

Although the criticisms of housing experts and policy-makers might not have had much direct effect on the building industry, they did shape its public, and also its self-, image. Indeed in Australia this image took a double hit. To the standard comparison with other industries was added an unfavourable contrast with the United States. In the late 1940s the building industry in the United States was quite widely regarded as a model of (relative) efficiency. For example, several study groups were sent there from Britain and all returned with glowing accounts of the relative efficiency of the American building industry (eg. Great Britain, Ministry of Works, 1944). At least one dealt explicitly with the distribution of building materials (Great Britain, Ministry of Works, 1948: Appendix IX). When, on the initiative of the Building Industry Congress of Victoria, an Australian group was sent overseas to gather information in 1954, it was instructed to spend most of its time in North America. It reported back that this strategic decision had been wise. It found that productivity was greater in the United States, in part because mechanisation was further advanced, but also because of better organisation, management, and in general a more progressive attitude (Australian Building Industry Productivity Team 1955: xiii). In large part its recommendation was that Australians should follow the American example. Just as significant as the report itself was the way that it was received. Reviewers in the building journals, including the *Australian Builder*, *Architecture in Australia*, *Construction*, *Contract Reporter*, *Building and Construction*, and *Australian Home Beautiful*, as well as in popular newspapers such as the *Melbourne Age* and the *West Australian*, accepted the Team's judgements as simple fact ('Building Industry Report Acclaimed...' 1956; McDonell 1956). Everyone believed that, whether by comparison with other industries or with builders in the United States, the Australian building industry was inefficient.

Although there was some substance to the unfavourable comparison with American methods, the broader judgement about the building industry as a whole was misguided. As Michael Ball (1988) has argued in general terms, and as Greig (1997) has suggested with particular reference to Australia, it depended upon untested assumptions about the form that manufacturing should take in all industries. In particular it assumed without demonstrating that factory production was necessarily the most efficient method of production. Critics ignored the fact that the rapidity of change, and of increases in efficiency, achieved in young industries such as car



assembly and electronics could not possibly be matched in long-established industries such as construction. Obsessed with 'revolutionary' leaps, such as the removal of assembly from building site to factory floor, critics passed over the innumerable incremental changes that had already been made to housebuilding over a period of centuries — everything from machine-made bricks and nails, to the development of 'balloon framing', using four-by-twos held together with nails.

Most surprisingly, critics of housebuilders were also blind to the cumulative significance of innovations that were reshaping the industry in the postwar era, notably power tools, the pre-fabrication of sub-assemblies, and the growth of sub-contracting. In 1959 Charles Morgan, a former M.P., referred to housebuilding as the 'Cinderella' among industries, unstable and backward in its methods ('Is the Building Industry Unstable?' 1959). To this the editor of *Construction*, the weekly paper of the Master Builders Association of New South Wales, commented 'it makes one wonder how many years have passed since Mr. Morgan left the building industry, which has now so many new materials and so many ways of using them that builders have to be alerted to keep in step with their application' ('Is the Building Industry Unstable?' 1959). Thinking that change must be dramatic, and that efficiency must take particular forms, even quite well-informed observers such as Morgan overlooked the fact that the building industry was already flexibly efficient, and rapidly becoming more so. During the 1940s productivity fell when builders and subcontractors took on many green and poorly-motivated workers (Howard 1987:45). Subsequently, however, great strides were made. Hall (1961: 7) has estimated that between 1950 and 1960 the productivity of the building industry rose at an annual rate of 6.6 per cent, compared with a much lower rate of improvement (2.5 per cent) in the economy as a whole. According to the organization which specifically represented housebuilders, it continued to lead other industries in productivity during the early 1960s (Housing Industry Association 1967: 15). Even allowing for some catchup in the early 1950s, this speaks of a group of enterprises which could respond effectively to change.

In a postwar building industry which was changing steadily, building supply dealers, among whom the timber merchant was the most significant, were to play a strategic role. How might that role be conceptualised? In order to define, and specify, the role of Australian timber merchants it is useful, first, to consider the broader range of functions that building supply dealers of all kinds have typically played in the housebuilding industry in modern capitalist societies.

### ***Building supply dealers***

In theory it is obvious that, in housebuilding as in any other industry, products must be distributed in order to be used. The distinctive characteristic of housebuilding is that, to this day, on-site assembly is the norm, so that it is building components rather than assembled units which have to be distributed from their manufacturers to the builders who re-

fashion and assemble them for sale. Historically, it was this peculiar characteristic which gave rise to building supply dealers, whose job it has been to gather together, stock, and often deliver diverse building components as needed. At the same time, the existence of dealers, and their ability to adapt to changing materials and circumstances, has helped to perpetuate the system of on-site assembly. There is nothing inevitable about this symbiotic relationship. As merchants have learned to their cost, materials can sometimes can be distributed more efficiently by the manufacturer directly to builder. Conversely, merchants cannot ensure that on-site assembly will be more cost-effective than factory production, though this is still usually the case. In the immediate postwar period, merchants occupied a strategic position in the building industry, but they had to struggle and adapt in order to maintain it.

If the position of building supply dealers has long been strategic, their exact role has varied greatly. Their significance has depended on the way in which building materials themselves are produced, upon the types of materials in question, and upon the nature of the builders. Where building materials are not produced by commercial enterprises — as, for example, where mud and concrete bricks, or building timber, are fashioned on site — then dealers have no role to play. The possibilities for this type of production depend on the local availability of raw materials: the right type of trees, sand, and so forth. Where raw materials are virtually ubiquitous and commercial manufacturers widespread, again dealers may not be needed. In heavily wooded regions where small sawmills are common, builders might find it cheaper (even if not more convenient) to buy directly. The same is true where local clay deposits and brickworks are common. The importance of the dealer also depends upon who is doing the actual building. Amateur owner-builders, and small commercial builders, are likely to rely quite heavily on the services of the dealer. They would find it difficult to obtain building materials from distant suppliers, and are more likely to rely on the sorts of short-term credit that dealers have often been willing to provide. In contrast, larger builders may be able to deal directly with manufacturers in buying job lots, and to be able to draw upon other credit resources. Dealers, then, will be especially important in places where building supplies are produced commercially, and where most house building is done by amateurs or small commercial builders.

Apart from providing materials and short-term credit, dealers are of necessity also a source of technical information. They are in a position to know more than most of their customers about the qualities of the materials which they sell, for example the merits of one type of timber as against another. In a situation where new materials and tools are being brought onto the market quite rapidly, dealers can perform a valuable service to builders and play a critical role in hastening, or delaying, technological change. This is the sort of need to which the editor of *Construction* referred in his response to Charles Morgan. *Construction* was the journal of the Master Builders, the giants of the construction industry. In general, the provision of



technical information is likely to be even more important for amateur builders and small contractors, who are likely to find it difficult to keep themselves abreast of current developments in the field.

Dealers have probably always provided credit and information in at least some degree. In more specific contexts one might expect them to offer additional services. One possibility is the precutting of framing timber, or the prefabrication of sub-assemblies, such as kitchen cabinets, windows, doors, roof trusses, or wall units. The extent to which the merchant undertakes such work will depend in part upon the relative costs of on-site as opposed to factory production. This in turn is likely to depend upon a complex combination of factors: whether there are wage differentials between those carpenters who work for builders as opposed to merchants, for example, or the extent to which the local climate imposes seasonal or irregular restrictions on site work. It may also depend upon the organization of the local building industry. In particular, large builders are likely to be in a position to undertake their own precutting and partial prefabrication, while smaller builders are not. Of course builders are not the only enterprises which might compete to produce joinery and sub-assemblies. Sawmills, and indeed other types of building suppliers, might try to enter the business. The extent to which the merchant undertakes this type of work is therefore very difficult to predict.

One type of situation where merchants are especially likely to undertake some form of prefabrication is where they also offer some type of 'package deal', involving the sale of all component parts and services for house construction. Historically, this has been a relatively uncommon, but nevertheless recurring, practice. In recent decades it has been associated with the prevalence of owner-construction. With very limited knowledge, many amateur builders will rely on the services of merchants and, other things being equal, are likely to prefer to deal with one rather than a number. From the customer's point of view the ideal would be for a single dealer to provide all necessary materials, credit, and information as a package deal, whether in stages so as to accommodate an extended building process and limited finance, or alternatively as a 'kit'.

Whether or not dealers will come to offer package deals will in turn depend on a number of circumstances. Of critical importance are the degree of fragmentation of the merchants, and the prevailing methods of construction. In many countries the major building materials have typically been distributed by different types of businesses: bricks and cement directly by their manufacturers, sawn timber by timber merchants (or 'lumber dealers'), hardware also by specialised dealers. Other materials, including roofing tiles, electrical and plumbers' supplies, might be available through one or other of the above, but not necessarily. It is unlikely that brick or cement manufacturers would attempt to provide house packages, for it would involve a significant reorientation of their businesses towards the consumer market. For that reason, in regions such as South Australia where brick or cement has been the norm, package offerings are likely to be uncommon.

Where wood frame construction, and to a lesser degree where brick veneer, is standard, packages are more likely. In an Australian context the east coast, notably Queensland and New South Wales, is likely territory. It is the timber merchant who is most likely to offer such packages. For a hardware store, the capital, effort, and perhaps especially the space which is required to add timber to its established lines of business is substantial. In contrast, for a timber merchant to add hardware and other builders' supplies is not such a major step. Perhaps most important of all, where wood frame construction prevails, wood is by far the most important single building material and customers would naturally look to the timber merchant first to offer package deals.

Whether timber merchants meet the demand for packages will also depend upon the nature of their relationship with the suppliers of sawn timber. It would be normal to expect this relationship to be close, even where the ownership of timber yards and sawmills was separate. Once regular trade relationships between mill and yard are established, it would be natural for each to feel a common interest in the promotion of wood against other types of building materials. This might readily find expression in trade associations and trade journals which embrace both. Historically, in many countries, including the United States and Australia, such was the case. In the United States, for many decades, *The American Lumberman* spoke for all branches of the industry, including logging companies, mills, wholesalers, and retailers, including large line-yard operators with many outlets as well as the small family-operated dealership. In Australia, *The Australian Timber Journal*, begun only in the 1930s, served a similar function into the postwar years. In this type of situation, the timber merchant may well believe that his long-term interests lie with his 'industry', and not with a speculative diversification into other lines of business which might well alienate his suppliers. Where yards actually own their own mills, or mills their own yards, the merchant's reluctance to experiment would be stronger. Timber merchants may be in the best position to offer house packages, but even when faced with strong demand they will not necessarily do so.

## 2 The Australian Timber Merchant in the 1940s

We may assume that at the beginning of the postwar era the Australian timber merchant sold timber, offered credit, and provided information to his builder customers. But who were these customers? What was the merchant's relationship with his suppliers? Did he offer any other services? How did he adapt to a rapidly-changing business environment, and to what effect? Published research provides only limited guidance. Most surveys of Australian architecture and construction industry pass silently over the merchants (eg. Andersson and McEvoy 1990; Archer 1987; Boyd 1978; Cuffley 1993; Greig, 1997). Even Hutton (1970), who makes some brief but perceptive comments about building suppliers in general, says nothing specifically about those who sold timber. In the early 1970s, however, two surveys of the timber industry nationwide (Australia, Department of Trade



and Industry 1971; Wymond, 1973-4), and an exhaustive case study of builders in New South Wales (Walsh 1972), together provided some suggestive information about the role that merchants played at that time. Relying on survey data, however, they provide more of a snapshot than an account of adaptation and change. In order to reconstruct the developing role of the timber merchants, therefore, I turned to the *Australian Timber Journal*. Especially after 1953, when Con Lembke took over as editor from his father, the *Timber Journal* provides a rich source of information about debates and trends within the timber industry, including valuable case histories of the initiatives being taken by specific merchants (Figure 1). Moreover, a series of editorials and commentaries written by Lembke himself provide a running critical commentary (Lembke 1956; 1958; 1960; 1961, 1962, 1966; see also Lloyd 1965). In developing my interpretation of the changing role of the Australian timber merchant I have relied especially upon the *Timber Journal*.

After World War II the timber merchant had a strategic position in the Australian building industry which was comparable to that of the lumber dealer, his counterpart in the United States. The situations of merchants and dealers were broadly similar, both in terms of their position within the building supply industry, and also in their relation to commercial builders. They were different, however, with respect to loggers and sawmills, a difference which was to prove important in shaping the response of the timber merchant to changing opportunities during the 1950s.

### *Building supply dealers in Australia*

As a construction material, timber was more important in Australia than in Britain or most of Europe, but less so than in the United States. It is difficult to be precise about this. For many years, available annual statistics on the materials used in new houses pertain only to external cladding and are unhelpful. Timber-framed houses with brick veneer were classified with those of cavity brick construction. Moreover, even cavity brick homes would typically contain a good deal of wood (for floors, roofs, and cabinetry) while, except for their chimneys, timber-clad and framed houses would have contained little brickwork. A more useful guide to the importance of wood are annual data pertaining to the occupations of building trades workers. These show that in the late 1940s at least forty per cent of all tradesmen (including labourers) were carpenters, a proportion which fell slowly to about 35 per cent by the mid-1960s.<sup>2</sup> Bricklayers, the next most common trade, never accounted for more than 12 per cent. These numbers suggest that timber was by far the most important single building material.

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2. Estimates derived from data reported annually in Australian Bureau of Statistics *Commonwealth Year Book*.

**Figure 1** Con Lembke was editor of the Australian Timber Journal, the trade journal for the timber trade. Lembke played an important part in encouraging timber merchants to adapt to new market conditions after World War II

**Source:** Graeme Evans (1995), p.270



Con Lembke, Managing Director and Editor  
*The Australian Timber Journal (Private Collection)*

If timber was the most important construction material it was even more prominent at the retail level. In the late 1940s the great majority of sawn timber was distributed to builders through retail merchants, although there was an important distinction between the imported and domestic product. Almost all imported timber was softwood, chiefly Douglas Fir, which was generally referred to as 'Oregon' pine although it was imported in large quantities from Canada as well as the United States. In the late 1940s it accounted for about a quarter of wood consumption in Australia (Wilson 1969: 39). In the construction industry it was used mostly for framing purposes, and was almost entirely distributed through merchants. Most timber used in Australia was produced domestically, and of this more than 80 per cent was eucalypt hardwood. Dry eucalypt can be too hard to drive a nail into, and builders much preferred to use it while still green. They would usually prefer to buy fresh-cut timber from a mill rather than drier timber from a retailer.<sup>3</sup> This practice was probably common in rural areas, and in

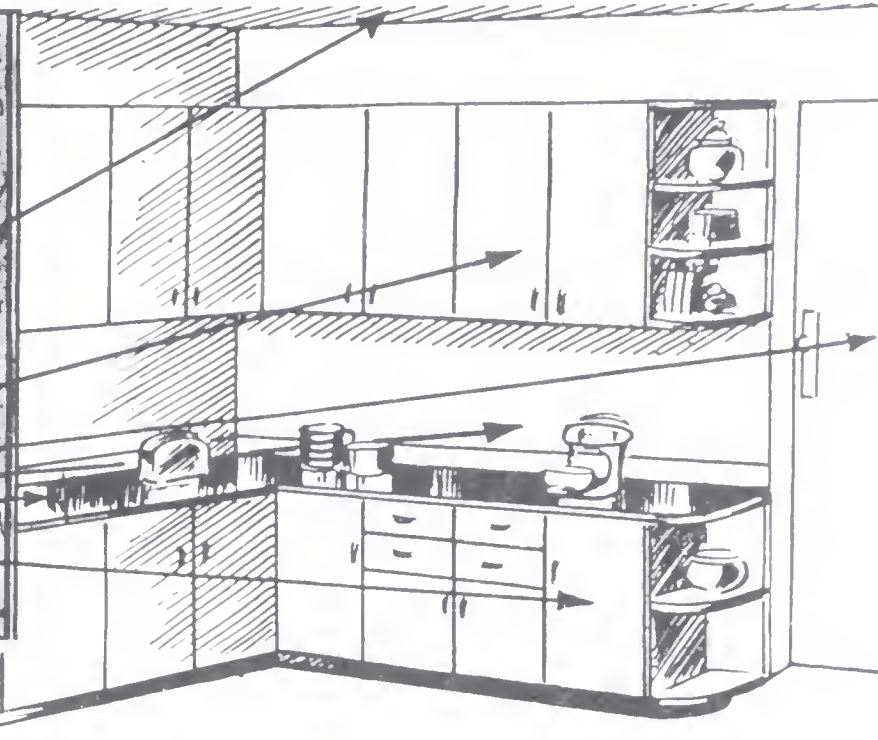
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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to John Dargavel for this point.



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**Figure 2** Hardboard was one of the first 'timber substitutes' that timber merchants began to sell after World War II. This is one of the earliest advertisements for hardboard to appear in the Australian Timber Journal.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal*, Jan. 1953.

urban centres where mills were close by. It is not clear how common direct selling was in the larger urban centres. There it is likely that a good deal of domestic, as well as imported, timber was usually through merchants.

Retailers were not consistently as important in other lines of building supplies. Some of the most basic materials were distributed almost entirely by manufacturers. Bricks, cement, and tiles (both terra cotta and concrete) were the most important, and so for a time was fibrous plaster (used for interior wall surfaces), manufactured locally by small local companies, usually on a custom order basis. Other materials were distributed in various ways. Thus although Wunderlich, the largest manufacturer of building materials in the country, sold its own metal work, terracotta tile, and corrugated asbestos roofing directly to builders, it distributed its 'Durabestos' (fibro) sheets, sinks, metal tile roofing, and flue pipes through both timber and hardware merchants (Wunderlich Ltd., 1957: 76). Other manufacturers, of asbestos cement sheets, hardboard, plasterboard, and corrugated iron also seem to have adopted an eclectic strategy for distribution (Figure 2).





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Available from all leading Hardware and Tool Stores.

Figure 3 Most power tools were sold by department stores or by hardware merchants. They made carpentry work easier, and were marketed to amateurs and tradesmen alike.

Source: *Australian Home Beautiful*, July 1953.



Although manufacturers sold bricks, tiles and cement, it was usually retailers who marketed tools, paint, and hardware. Historically, and well into the postwar era, the basic tools of carpentry and some of the other building trades, including hammers, pliers, saws, mitre boxes, wrenches, spanners, drill sets, vices, tinsnips, scissors, shears, clippers, files, and abrasives — along with basic hardware such as nails, screws, hinges, tape, soldering flux, bolts, and other fasteners — were sold through hardware stores. More specialised builders' hardware, including locksets, doorhangers, pipes, tanks, sanitaryware, dampcourses, concrete mixers, and wheelbarrows, were often sold by retailers who specialised in the contractor trade, who advertised chiefly in the builders' magazines, and who were listed in telephone 'pink pages' under 'builders supplies' rather than 'hardware'. Paint, small plumbing and electrical supplies were provided primarily, and consistently, through retail outlets, often specialised in each line.

In fact, in the late 1940s there was a high degree of specialisation among building supply dealers. On the whole, timber merchants followed the pattern. The chief exception seems to have been Western Australia. It seems that merchants there had diversified quite early. Whittakers, for example, had long sold hardware. Indeed, they were so successful in selling locally-produced wood stoves that the manufacturer, Fred Metters' Foundry, cast Whittakers' name onto their product.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the hardware stores there had also diversified. In 1957, under the pseudonym of 'Kookaburra', Harry Roberts (1957) published a book in England which instructed prospective immigrants as to how they might build their own homes 'down under'. He suggested (Roberts 1957: 8) that 'hardware stores' would be able to supply everything that the builder might need, and to back him up an advertisement from Griffiths Hardware in Gosnells, W.A., offered to do just that. It is not quite clear whether Roberts really meant to refer to hardware stores, as opposed to timber merchants and on the face of it, outside of Western Australia, his advice could have been misleading. It seems clear however, that among timber merchants diversification had proceeded quite far.

The only unspecialised retail outlet for building materials was the department store. They had long sold some hardware, and they also became important outlets for paint and power tools, the latter being an increasingly important influence on house building during the 1950s (Figure 3). In 1957 it was reported that the manufacturers of power tools reckoned that about three quarters of their sales to Do-It-Yourself (DIY) customers 'originate in, or are clinched, by...demonstrations [in] the largest city stores' ('Power Tool News' 1957). It is likely however that, along with other tools, tradesman carpenters bought their power equipment in hardware stores.

The prominence of wood in construction, the fact that other building materials were sold directly by manufacturers, while still others were sold by a variety of specialised retailers, all helped to make the timber merchant

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4. Telephone conversation with Bryce Moore, Fremantle, WA, 3 June 1997.

pre-eminent among building supply dealers. In this respect, like the American lumber dealer, he was well-placed to have a significant influence on the postwar building industry.

### *The social organisation of housebuilders in Australia*

In the immediate postwar years the social organisation of the Australian building industry also gave the timber merchant a significant position, again comparable to that of the lumber dealer. Usually in order to deplore the fact, contemporaries noted that the great majority of Australian house builders operated on a very small scale (Ifould 1947: 30). We cannot document this fact precisely, although published annual data on the numbers of contractors, subcontractors, and wage-earners in the construction industry are suggestive. The ratio of wage earners to contractors and 'subbies' provides a measure of the average number of employees per building enterprise. Between 1948, when such data were first published, and 1965, this ratio never exceeded four (ABS, various years). An alternative indicator of company size, the ratio of contractors to subcontractors and wage-earners, never exceeded ten. For two reasons, these crude estimates of company size tend to overestimate the size of most housebuilders. First, as averages, they are skewed by the existence of a comparatively small number of quite large builders. The median or modal construction company would have been appreciably smaller. Second, they pertain to all segments of the construction industry, including companies involved in commercial and engineering projects, such as office buildings, shopping centres, and bridges. Companies in these sectors of the construction industry were much larger than those engaged in housebuilding.

Given the inadequacies of aggregate data, a more meaningful picture of the housebuilding industry is that offered by Walsh (1972). As part of his study of the housebuilding industry in New South Wales in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Walsh compiled historical information for Newcastle from unpublished records of building approvals. He found that in the early 1950s about three-fifths of all the permits granted to commercial builders in Newcastle were taken out by enterprises which were erecting fewer than ten dwellings in any given year (Walsh 1972: Table 11, p.109). Given that, by definition, larger builders took out more permits, the vast majority of Newcastle's builders operated on a very small scale. Approaching two thirds built three homes a year or fewer, and almost thirty per cent built between four and nine (Walsh 1972: Table 10, p.104). There is no way of knowing whether the situation in Newcastle, Australia's fifth largest city, was exactly typical. In general we might expect larger builders to have played a relatively more significant role in the larger metropolitan centres. It is noteworthy, however, that data reported by Walsh for 1969 indicate that the size composition of the housebuilding industry in Newcastle and Sydney was broadly similar. In that year, although very large builders were rather more active in Sydney, an almost identical proportion of builders in both cities —



88.6 per cent in Sydney and 87.5 per cent in Newcastle — erected fewer than nine homes (Walsh 1972, Tables 5 and 6, p.100).

If most commercial builders were very small, they also had limited capital. As a result they relied heavily on credit. Walsh found that in the late 1960s many builders obtained construction credit from lending institutions, usually in the form of a series of small payments that were made as specified stages in the construction process were completed. He also found that small and medium-sized builders, in particular, relied heavily on short-term credit from suppliers, chiefly timber merchants (Walsh 1972: 19, 21). This represented the continuation of a long-standing tradition, whereby merchants would routinely extend 30-day credit to contractors, and perhaps 60-day credit to their larger or more favoured customers.<sup>5</sup> This was accepted, even mandatory, practise. John Beecroft, present owner of Newport Timbers, a yard in an interwar suburb of Melbourne, recalls that when his father attempted to establish his business as a cash-and-carry in the 1920s, pressure from contractor customers compelled him to provide credit. Because the Australian building industry was dominated by small operators, timber merchants had found it necessary to offer 'terms'.

In this respect also, the Australian timber merchant was broadly similar to his North American counterpart, and different from his namesake in Britain. For reasons which are not well-understood, large builders have played a significant role in Britain since at least the late nineteenth century. Better-capitalised, having access to other sources of finance, and using less wood for construction purposes, they have not relied heavily on merchant credit. By way of contrast, the American housebuilding industry has always been dominated by small builders, even in the larger urban centres (Warner 1962). Although large project builders, such as the Levitt brothers, attracted a good deal of attention in the immediate postwar years, in the 1950s they did not build the majority of houses. Indeed the majority of builders were very small (Murphy 1957). As a result, in America as in Australia, lumber dealers routinely provided credit. The small builder needed this service, and by providing it the merchant helped to ensure that small builders continued to play a large role in the building industry.

### *The Australian timber trade*

One of the distinctive features of the Australian timber merchant in the late 1940s, and the one which set him most clearly apart from his American counterpart, was his close relationship with suppliers. Traditionally, the various segments of the American lumber industry had reckoned that they had interests in common. These were articulated through industry associations as well as their trade journal, *The American Lumberman*. It is not clear how common vertical integration was within the US lumber trade but, by the early twentieth century, retail competition was undermining the loyalty of retailers to wood. The most obvious threat came from the

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5. In fact, builders often failed to pay up on time, and in effect used credit for up to 90 days.

manufacturers of mail order kit houses, such as Sears and Aladdin (Butler, 1917: 4; Mueller, 1916). A great selling point of the kit was the convenience of having everything included in one package. At first, many dealers and manufacturers colluded in an effort to maintain lumber prices and to restrict the supply of lumber to the mail order companies. These were branded as illegal, though this probably did not matter (Bryant 1922: 318-329). Many of the kit manufacturers owned (or soon acquired) their own mills, and were relatively immune from trade boycotts.

In this context, a growing number of retailers began to believe that, in order to compete, they would have to sell 'homes not a piece of 2 by 4' (Ludwig 1927: 14; cf. 'Building Homes Out of Houses', 1919). This involved a change not only in what they did but also how they offered their services: it meant diversification and a new emphasis on 'merchandising'. As early as the 1910s, a minority had begun to think of themselves less as outlets for lumber and more as retailers of building supplies. In 1917 a national organisation exclusively for Retail Lumbermen held its first annual convention, and in the same year a new trade journal, *Building Supply News* (BSN), was established to speak specifically for retailer interests. From the beginning, BSN argued the case for diversification, and this view coloured its coverage of trade practises and annual conventions (eg. 'Lumbermen Not Handling Supplies...', 1926). By the 1910s, horizontal organisation among dealers was widespread, taking the form of retail chains that were known as 'line yards' (Gries 1919). The largest of these in the western states was Long-Bell, which had expanded from a single outlet in Columbus, Kansas, in 1883 to include a network of about 120 yards by the mid-1920s (Long-Bell Lumber Company 1927: 7). In large parts of the west and mid-west, such line yards accounted for about half the total (Butler 1917: 6). Many of these line yards were owned by lumber companies that owned mills and forest reserves. Long-Bell was a case in point. Their strong retail orientation, however, encouraged diversification. By the 1920s, Long-Bell was insisting that its managers stock a wide range of building supplies, including hardware, paints, windows, and doors, and that these be 'attractively arranged' (Long-Bell Lumber Company 1927: 15, 24-25). The line yards were professionally run, and in the 1920s came under the influence of mass marketing techniques. Informed observers noted a trend towards 'merchandising' (Butler 1917: 95; Hill 1922: 17; Ludwig 1927: 7-10). Dealers sought and promoted their business rather than waiting for customers to walk through the door. In practical terms this meant more, cleaner, and brighter store displays, the more extensive use of advertising, and the judicious use of credit.

*The American Lumbermen* recognised that retail operations were changing, partly in response to the threat from mail order business (eg. 'Erecting a "Modern Building Material Store"', 1919; 'An Exceptional ...' 1926; 'Realm of the Retailer' 1926). Because it also had to speak for forest companies, mills, and lumber wholesalers, however, for many years the *Lumberman* fought a rearguard action against wood 'substitutes' (eg. 'Urges "Learn About Wood" Campaign', 1919). In the interwar years the continuing



skepticism of the *American Lumberman* towards wood substitutes probably represented the majority view among retailers. One of the most prominent advocates of efficient merchandising in the industry in this period was Arthur Hood, originally a lumber dealer from Minnesota. In the 1920s Hood wrote what came to be regarded as the text book for the trade, *Profitable Lumber Retailing* (1928). He devoted several chapters to merchandising, but was cautious on the issue of diversification. He argued that, other things being equal, 'the lumber retailer's first loyalty should be to wood and wood products' (Hood 1928: 71). Conditions were changing steadily, however, and quite rapidly after World War II. Hood took over the editorship of the *Lumberman* and in 1947 added the phrase 'and Building Products Merchandiser' to its masthead. From then on, the journal regularly featured articles about diversified dealers such as Summerhayes Lumber in Brantford, Ontario, who sold 'Everything to Build Anything' (1949). It is clear that by then diversification had become the conventional wisdom. In 1952 a survey showed that only about half of the revenue of lumber dealers across the United States came from lumber (National Retail Lumber Dealers' Association 1952: 8). A decade later, nine out of ten dealers sold paints and hardware while half sold bricks and concrete blocks (Row 1964). In the early postwar years in the United States, most lumber dealers styled themselves as all-purpose retailers to the building industry.

The situation in Australia was different. In the late 1940s, and indeed well into the postwar era, timber merchants continued to think of themselves very much as part of the timber trade. This outlook reflected a fairly high degree of vertical integration and a blurring of functional distinctions. The opening observations of C.R.Lloyd to a three-day forum of the timber trade in Melbourne in 1965 made the point very effectively. Lloyd was Managing Director of Lloyd's Timber Mills, of Port Adelaide, itself part of a vertically-integrated network of family-run companies which included forestry interests in Western Australia, as well as mills, joinery factories, and several timber and building supply yards in the Brisbane area ('Fiftieth Anniversary of Lloyds' Companies' 1965). His presentation was both a retrospective and a prospective overview, specifically, of the role of the timber merchant. He opened by observing that 'our industry is one full of complex trading and producing entities' which he then (Lloyd 1965: 35) proceeded to enumerate:

- The Sawmiller Indigenous
- The Sawmiller / Wholesaler
- The Sawmiller / Wholesaler / Retailer
- The Sawmiller / Importer / Wholesaler / Retailer
- The Merchant / Remanufacturer / Wholesaler
- The Merchant / Remanufacturer / Retailer
- The Merchant Retailer
- The Importer

Lloyd's scheme would suggest that merchants were routinely associated with sawmilling, and often with importing and wholesaling operations. This appears to have been the case. Nationwide statistics are not available, but an investigation into the timber industry in the mid-1950s yielded interesting information for New South Wales. It found that among the 104 members of the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants Association, 16 owned their own sawmills and no less than 72 had financial interests in one or more mill operations (Landa 1955: 736).

Complete integration was most common among the largest companies. A good, early example was the Kauri group. Formed in 1888 by an Auckland sawmiller and a Melbourne timber merchant, the Kauri group went through a number of incarnations (Roche, Dargavel, and Mills 1993). It began by purchasing vast tracts of bush, as well as twenty-eight sawmills, in New Zealand, and set up operations as an international wholesaler. It later acquired interests in Western Australia. Then, with the depletion of the Kauri forest, after World War II it purchased plymills and timber merchants in most States of Australia. This type of vertical integration was especially apparent in Western Australia where two companies, Bunning's and Millar's, dominated the logging, milling, and wholesaling of timber, and also ran retail yards. These companies were large enough to think nationally. Soon after the war, for example, Bunnings acquired large mills in North Queensland, as well as additional smaller ones in Western Australia (Mills 1986: 144). These acquisitions guaranteed supplies of timber to their existing joinery factory, to a new factory in Manjimup which produced prefabricated homes, and to their several yards in the Perth area (Mills 1986: 158). Millar's were importer-exporters with a head office in Perth and a national wholesaling operation. Elsewhere, too, major companies tied together all segments of the timber trade. In Tasmania, the oldest and largest of all timber companies was Risby's, which in the 1940s logged on its own land, milled, and distributed timber through its main yard on Collins Street in Hobart (Graeme-Evans, 1995: 186). On a smaller scale a company like Hynes in Queensland also extended its operations from stump to store (Hyne 1980; Johnston 1988). One of the more impressive operations was that of George Hudson's, in Sydney, which was described in 1959 as 'the most versatile timber operator in Australia' ('Hudson's New Ready-cut Factory...' 1959: 4). Apart from running a sawmill, importing, wholesaling, and retail operation, Hudson's made joinery and flooring as well as ready-cut homes and garages. Hudson's expanded in the 1950s, but its reach had been extensive for many decades: it had been making and marketing kits, for example, since the turn of the century (Hardy 1970: 49; Hudson and Son 1919).

Some smaller merchants also owned sawmills. A case in point was J. Wright and Sons, a Melbourne merchant which acquired a country sawmill in 1958 (Dargavel, 1988: 128). Most smaller companies, however, contented themselves with slightly looser ties. These could take various forms. Given that many sawmills were very small, probably one of the more typical arrangements was for merchants to provide loans to preferred suppliers. The



investments of Bowen and Pomeroy, another Melbourne merchant, are probably indicative. Bowen's did not buy a mill, but in the 1940s and 1950s they entered into agreements with nine small sawmillers, lending, or guaranteeing bank loans, for new equipment in return for preferred trading agreements (Dargavel 1988a: 116). In 1945, for example, they loaned \$2000 to Dwyer Bros, Daylesford for 'setting up a sawmill the whole output of which is to be available to this company' (Dargavel 1988a: 117). In the immediate postwar period these sorts of arrangements probably became more common. Merchants were faced with a rapid increase in demand for timber, and a shortage of supply. Many reckoned that by strengthening their ties to suppliers they could better secure their trading position.

Australian merchants not only maintained close ties with sawmills but also, very typically, ran their own re-sawing operations. These were the 'Merchant/ Remanufacturer/ Retailers' to which Lloyd (1965: 35) referred. Re-sawing involved the trimming of large pieces of timber in all dimensions, not merely length. It was a practise which was strongly encouraged by the tariff structure on imported timber, since four-by-twos carried a much higher tariff than larger baulks.<sup>6</sup> Re-sawing was practiced by all the companies that I have mentioned, including Bowen and Pomeroy, J. Wright, and Newport Timbers. The situation in Perth, for example, was typical. In the second rank of merchants, one of the leading companies was Whittakers, which owned a re-sawing mill and joinery plant at their yard in Subiaco (Moore 1987: 169). Even Magro's, a small merchant established after the war on Beechboro Road in Bayswater, had a re-sawing mill and joinery works (May 1997: 277). Re-sawing and joinery entailed a capital investment, while blurring the lines between producer and retailer. They helped to consolidate the merchant's identification with the timber, rather than the building supply, industry.

The links between individual retailers and producers were reflected in cross-membership of the leading trade associations. A figure like C.H. Hando, while not typical, exemplifies the sorts of associational linkages that tied the industry together. As Managing Director of George Hudson Pty. in the early 1950s, Hando had been 'active in practically every phase of the timber industry — as an importer, timber merchant, sawmiller and plywood manufacturer' ('Timber Industry Personalities' 1954). He had been a director of various timber-related industries, was Executive Officer and Past President of the Sydney Timber Importers' Association, and also Councillor and Past President of the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants' Association. In Western Australia, the linkages went further, for a single trade association, the Associated Sawmillers and Timber Merchants of Western Australia, represented all branches of the industry ('An Association serves an Industry' 1962; Hanson 1958: 8-9). Apart from such organisational links, the industry was represented by a single trade journal which, from the

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6. It also made sense for domestic eucalypt, which would dry and harden more slowly if stored in larger dimensions.

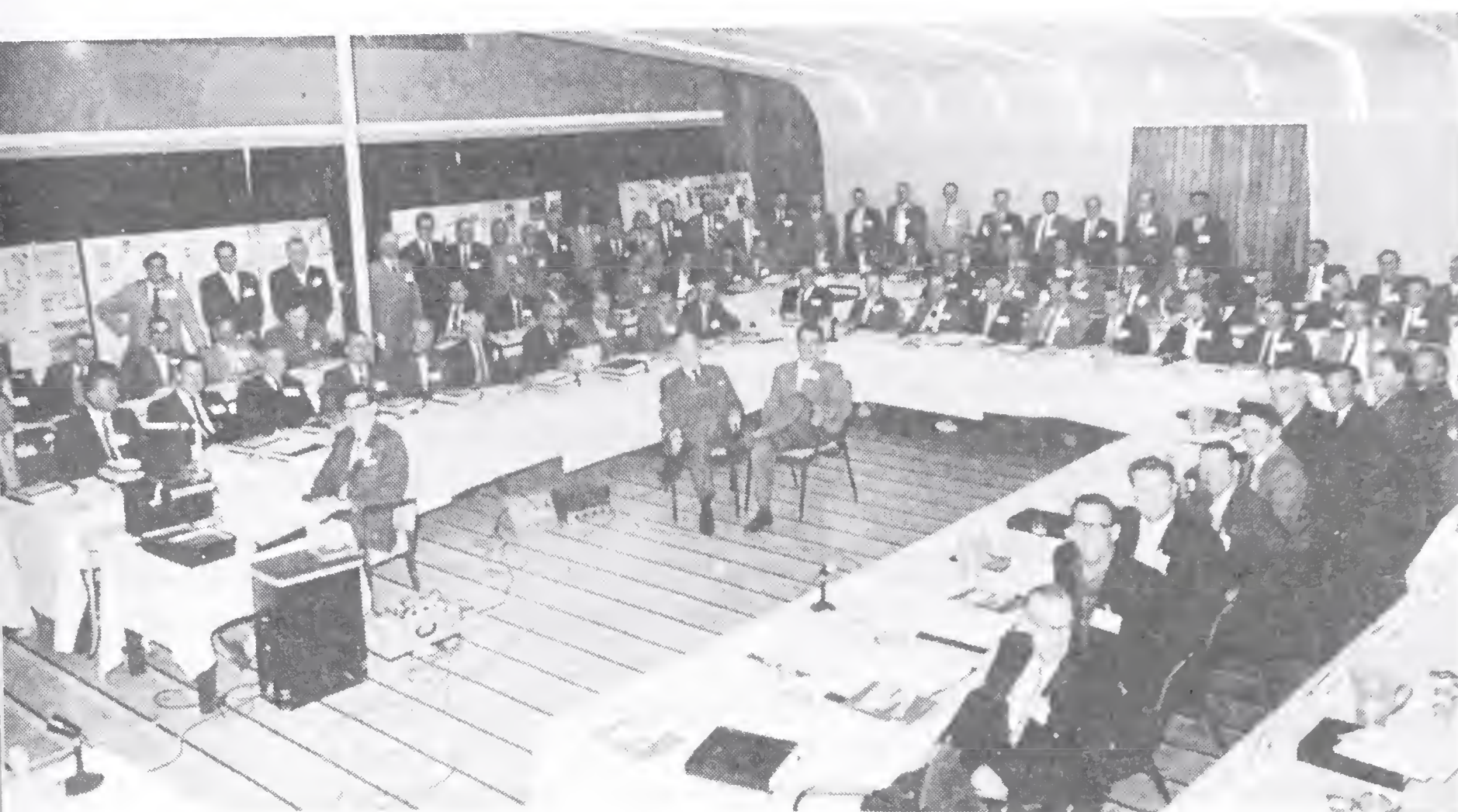
1930s, clearly aimed to speak for the interests of the timber trade as a whole. The Australian timber merchant was therefore part of a structure of interests and associations which ran vertically, rather than horizontally across the building retail sector. In this important respect, by the 1940s he differed from his American counterpart.

When Australians visited the United States and Canada in the 1950s and early 1960s they were struck by a number of contrasts, but above all by the stronger retail orientation of the North American lumber dealer. Early in 1960 Con Lembke spent two months touring North America and reported his impressions. In his list of ten differences between timber operations on the two continents, virtually all touch on the difference in retail emphasis (Lembke 1960: 87). In the first two he noted the way in which lumber dealers were essentially 'stockists', relying entirely on milling operations elsewhere; in the third he reported the absence of price and supply agreements between specific yards and mills, and in another observed how rare it was for American dealers to provide re-saw facilities except where a large contractor business demanded it. Two years later Don Barnes, Director of the Timber Development Association of Australia (NSW Branch), was struck by the same sorts of thing. The lumber dealer, he declared with approval, 'owes his allegiance to no industry or material' and simply handles 'the material and products that are easily sold with the best profits' (Barnes 1962: 69).

To a considerable extent the national difference in the industry was reflected in the trade journals. In the United States, by the beginning of the 1950s both *Building Supply News* and *The American Lumberman* devoted a considerable amount of space to reporting upon the retailing of timber and other building supplies. In their editorial policy both were enthusiastically endorsing the idea that lumber dealers should diversify their lines, and market aggressively not merely to contractors but also to the consumer market. In contrast, the *Australian Timber Journal* featured articles exclusively on the timber trade. Its covers usually showed logging operations or large mill machinery, and only occasionally a merchant or a house. When Con Lembke took over from his father as editor in 1953 the balance changed, but only in a significant way after 1957. The following year, Lembke invited Art Hood to visit Australia in 1959 and to give two workshops on lumber retailing (Figure 4). Before Hood came over, Lembke sent him some recent copies of the *Australian Timber Journal*. As Lembke later reported in an editorial, perhaps a little ruefully, Hood had been astonished: 'I confess that I was a little shocked in looking over your various issues to note the scarcity of articles on merchandising and marketing...It reminds me of our own industry some years ago.' (Lembke 1958: 2).

In terms of his role in the building industry and the network of building suppliers, the timber merchant occupied a similar position to that of the lumber merchant. With stronger vertical trade linkages, however, it was not clear that he would respond in the same ways to the economic changes of the postwar era.





**Figure 4** In 1959 Con Lembke (centre right) organised two Australian workshops on behalf of Art Hood (center left), editor of *The American Lumberman and Building Products Merchandiser*. These workshops played a catalytic role in encouraging Australian timber merchants to adopt new business methods.

**Source:** Graeme-Evans (1995), p.240.

### 3 Influences on the Timber Merchant, 1945-1965

In Australia, as in almost every other country, the building industry faced an enormous surge in demand at the end of the Second World War, and underwent substantial structural change. There were significant innovations in building materials and tools, as well as in methods of homebuilding. Caught in the middle, most timber merchants perceived these changes as threats, but a few also recognised opportunities.

#### *Shortages and innovations in materials and tools*

The housing shortage after World War II was very severe, and in the late 1940s almost all observers agreed that the main barrier to meeting the housing needs of Australians was the shortage of building materials. Although precise comparison is not possible, it seems that the situation in Australia was worse, and improved more slowly, than in North America. There, the worst shortages were over by the beginning of the 1950s. In Australia, however, they provoked the Commonwealth government to encourage the importation of more than eighteen thousand prefabricated



dwellings between 1950 and 1953 (Australian Department of National Development 1956: 6). Shortages were an issue as late as 1954, when the Australian Productivity Team reported that building materials were both more abundant and varied in the United States (Australian Building Industry Productivity Team, 1955: xiii).

The supply difficulties were most severe in the case of bricks, where the lack of labour, the need for new capital expenditure, and the exhaustion of some of the more easily worked clay resources, long prevented the industry from restoring production even to pre-war levels (Australia and New Zealand Bank 1954: 27). Some brick companies even moved from clay to cement ('Mud to Clay to Cement' 1956). The shortage of bricks compelled some municipalities, under State pressure, to relax their 'brick limits', which had prohibited frame construction (eg 'Brick Areas...' 1957; Cooper 1954; Moore 1987: 147). At the same time, State Housing Commissions experimented with timber and concrete construction, even in areas like West and South Australia where consumers still preferred cavity brick (Moore 1987: 147).

The extreme shortage of bricks provided an opportunity for timber merchants either to expand their business or at least to make welcome profits. Shortages of timber, of course, were a problem, but supplies did increase quite rapidly as, for political reasons, mill permits were granted to many new operators. Between 1945 and 1953 the number of sawmills in Australia doubled (Dargavel and Boutland, 1988: 72). Since many of the new mills were very small, the increase in production was more modest, roughly fifty per cent, but it comfortably exceeded pre-war levels. Meanwhile, between 1944-45 and 1951-52 timber imports more than quadrupled, also exceeding the highest levels reached during the 1930s (Wilson 1969: 39). In a sellers' market, then, merchants had a steadily expanding amount of material to sell. It would appear that, for a few years, profits rose (Howard 1987: 44).

The favourable situation for timber merchants did not last very long. Because the supply of conventional building materials was so inadequate, there was great pressure to innovate (Cuffley 1993: 72-89; Freeland 1972: 266-267; Greig 1995: 80-84; Pickett 1993). The shortage of terra cotta tile encouraged the production of a concrete substitute. Initially the quality was indifferent, but within a few years improvements were made. Plasterboard slowly made inroads into the market for fibrous cement, and together they displaced the tradition of plaster on lathe. These changes had no great significance for the timber dealer, but other developments did. Asbestos cement (fibro) sheets, available since the 1920s, became suddenly popular for external cladding, particularly in New South Wales. Sold by Wunderlich as 'Durabestos' and by James Hardie as 'Fibrolite', they were a cost-effective alternative to weatherboard, acceptable for inexpensive homes. Cement blocks, and to a much more limited extent poured concrete, became more popular, replacing some demand for framing timber. For interior work, plywoods and compressed fibre board began to replace wood in certain types

of cabinetry. An Australian hardwood version of 'Masonite' became popular, as did 'Cane-It' made by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company.

Manufacturers of steel and aluminium-framed windows posed a specific, and rapidly-growing threat to manufacturers of joinery, many of them local merchants. Metal-framing was stronger and more readily able to accommodate the new fashion for larger windows, sometimes extending from ceiling to floor. In the mid-1950s, technical advances made it possible for a new company, Stegbar Windowalls, to offer precut window frames for glass-wall structures, eventually to a national market. This was hailed by the timber industry ('A Long Awaited Transfusion' 1956). With an appealing 'modern' look, designed by Robin Boyd, Stegbar's windows proved competitive, and by the mid-1960s the company had become Australia's largest manufacturer of framed windows ('Advertising and Displays...' 1965). Together with smaller imitators, it slowed the incursion of timber substitutes, but brand-name windows represented a challenge to some joinery shops, and not all were distributed through timber merchants. Moreover, by the 1960s Stegbar was making aluminium windows too since, as a company representative explained 'our customers are asking for them' ('Advertising and Displays...' 1965: 23). It had adopted the philosophy that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The challenge to the merchant was implicit, but significant.

Even by the early 1950s timber 'substitutes', as merchants at first termed them, were making serious inroads into their business. A credit squeeze put a damper on housebuilding in 1952, and after that, although the building industry recovered, the consumption of wood stagnated. The peak consumption, of 1.77 billion superfeet of timber, reached in 1951-52 was not matched again until 1959-60, and then again in 1964-65, and in both cases just barely.<sup>7</sup> In the intervening years consumption flagged, to lows of 1.36 billion superfeet in 1952-53, 1.59 in 1957-58, and 1.52 in 1961-62.<sup>8</sup> If anything the competition from other building materials increased over time. Surveys undertaken by the Housing Industry Association in the 1960s and early 1970s found 'keen' competition among materials' suppliers, with a 'considerable degree of substitution' of wood in various applications (Housing Industry Association 1967: 7; 1972: 5). Apart from the growing popularity of brick veneer for cladding, of metal for window and door frames, and particle board for cupboards, the Association noted the prevalence of concrete raft flooring, especially in Western Australia, and of the incursion of steel framing into New South Wales.

One of the advantages that all of these materials possessed was greater consistency than wood. Noting this, at a timber industry forum organised in

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7. The superfoot was a standard measure denoting one twelfth of a cubic foot (ie. one foot by one foot by one inch), and for sawn timber is equivalent to the North American 'board foot'. One thousand superfeet of sawn timber are equivalent to 2.36 cubic metres.

8. Although these data pertain to the consumption of wood in all sectors of the economy, since about half went for housebuilding they give a fair impression of the main building cycles and trends.



1965, the President of the Victorian Division of the Housing Industry Association, commented that he could see 'the builder staying away from timber unless timber can improve its performance' (Bosseter 1965). For a short period sales had boomed, but after 1951 the timber industry in general, and the merchant in particular, had to work very hard to maintain his position.

### *'Disorder' in the timber trade*

The competition from wood substitutes, and stagnant demand, put pressure on the relationships between merchants and sawmillers. This first became apparent during the slump of 1952. In the good times, merchants bought not only from their preferred suppliers but also other, independent mills. During the slump, however, these independents found great difficulty in selling their product. Quite a number began to try to sell directly to builders, with some success. In Newcastle, NSW, members of the Newcastle Timber Merchants' Association distributed about 80 per cent of the hardwood used by local builders in 1952, but by 1955 this proportion had fallen to 50 per cent as local mills began selling directly (Landa 1955: 733, 736). The shift towards direct selling was probably less marked in Sydney, and other capital cities, since the distance from mill to market in the Newcastle area was comparatively short. Nevertheless, direct sales were a potentially serious development for the retailer.

Parallel developments occurred in other sectors of the building supply industry, and a common response was for manufacturers and retailers to draw together to promote the interests of their particular material (Hutton 1970: 178). This was the initial reaction of the timber trade. Merchants tried to gain control over the market by making collective price agreements with sawmills. The situation in New South Wales is best documented since it became the subject of an enquiry (Landa 1955). There, the trend towards price fixing on imported timber had begun in a serious way in 1940. In that year, on the initiative of A.E. Heath, the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants' Association (SSTMA) had incorporated and a Sydney Timber Importers' Association was formed. The two associations established a price list. Merchants agreed not to sell for less than the list price, and importers agreed not to supply non-members, or those members who undercut the list. Similar agreements were reached with merchants' associations in Newcastle, Wollongong, and Gosford. It is likely that these agreements had some effect. Members of the merchant's association distributed more than 85 per cent of the imported timber sold in the Sydney area, while more than eighty per cent of all imported timber distributed in New South Wales in the early 1950s was sold for not less than the list price (Landa 1955: 719, 720).

When domestic sawmills moved into direct selling after 1952, the merchants tried to establish a similar arrangement for domestic timber. Under a proposed Timber Mills Scheme, sawmillers would have been guaranteed a minimum price while merchants would have regained control



over the builders' custom. In such fashion, merchants attempted to reassert their role as exclusive distributors of timber.

The attempt was doomed. When the Timber Mills Scheme became public an enquiry was established. Mr Justice Richards found that the agreement with importers was an illegal combination, and that the proposed arrangement with domestic mills would have been, if implemented (Landa 1955). Merchants, importers, and sawmills were then instructed to abandon such attempts at price fixing. The timber trade was never the same again. A slow recovery in demand in the late 1950s was followed by a serious downturn in the early 1960s. Once again some mills were left out in the cold, while the remainder found that competition almost eliminated their profit margin on hardwood scantling, their stock in trade.<sup>9</sup> Direct selling became widespread. Thus, for example, in 1959 the Standard Sawmilling Co. at Murwillumbah, in northern New South Wales, reorganised its operations so as to sell directly to builders in the Brisbane area, eighty-six miles away. The company employed a salesman in Brisbane, who phoned orders to the mill and who could guarantee his builder customers delivery of entire house lots, if necessary within twenty-four hours ('The Sawmiller who Bypasses the Timber Merchant, Why?' 1966: 21). With many other mills adopting a similar business plan, the pattern of distribution of domestic timber became, in a term widely used both in the timber trade and also in government reports, 'disorderly' (Australia. Department of Trade and Industry 1971: 61).

### *The appearance of large builders*

The impetus for direct selling came not only from disaffected sawmillers but also from a new generation of builders. First, in the late 1940s, were those employed by state housing agencies which, in the face of shortages, routinely arranged to stockpile and distribute a wide range of materials (eg. Housing Commission of New South Wales, 1949: 14-15). Indeed, for a time the Supplies Section of the South Australia Housing Trust directly imported its own timber (Marsden 1986: 96). The importation of prefabricated housing, almost all timber framed, also limited the merchant's scope of action.

Perhaps just as important, in the long run, was the way that public housing agencies encouraged the growth of large builders. In the 1950s there were still plenty of small and medium-sized builders, but slowly a number of quite large companies also emerged. The first of these had been A.V. Jennings Pty, which established itself during the 1930s, grew steadily with government contracts during the 1940s, and by the early 1950s was building hundreds of homes a year (Garden 1992). By then, with state contracts, one or two other builders were operating on a substantial scale, Frank Marshall in Adelaide being a case in point (Marsden 1986: 57). It was only in the late

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9. Scantling is small and medium-sized constructional timber, four-by-twos, strapping, and so forth.

1950s, however, that large, project builders became an established feature of the housing market in all cities (Hutton 1970: 83-91; Judd 1970: 16).

Large builders were in a position to place substantial orders for timber and other materials. They soon found it advantageous to deal directly with the manufacturers of most building materials, including timber (Hutton 1970: 178). A survey of large, 'project' builders in the Sydney area in 1960 found that one of their main economies of scale was their ability to buy material in bulk, in many cases supplying it at cost to subcontractors ('Project Builders' 1961: 78). The largest builders went even further. Jennings had actually purchased a timber merchant and two small sawmills during the war in order to guarantee his supplies (Garden 1992: 57, 59). He later established subsidiaries which manufactured building components, including 'Trimview' metal windows. This became a common pattern. Walsh (1972: 23-24) found that, of seventeen large builders that he surveyed in the Sydney area in the late 1960s, nine produced or distributed their own supplies, eight owned their own sawmills and joinery works where they pre-cut cupboards, windows, doors, and so forth. Several had their own building supply subsidiaries which handled paint, hardware, plasterboard, and asbestos cement. One even made bricks. By then, direct buying from mills had become typical in the Newcastle area for both large and medium-sized builders, though it was still largely confined to large builders in Sydney and, probably, other capital cities. The timber merchant was steadily losing his larger customers.

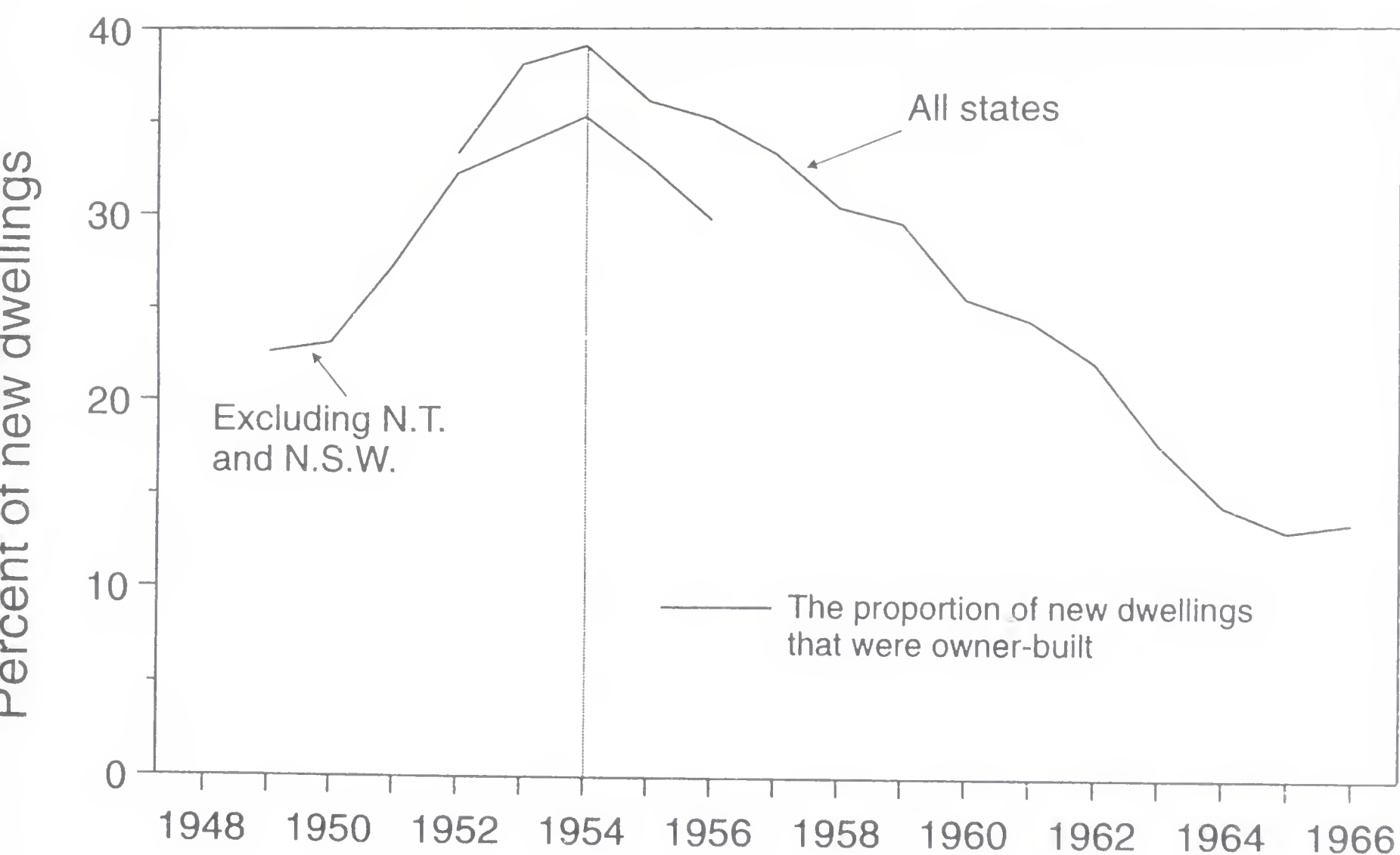
As he came to rely more upon the small and medium-sized builder for his business, the timber merchant found that builders' debts became more of a problem. Small builders had always relied most on the merchant's credit, and merchants had to handle these customers very carefully. When John Hutton undertook a national survey of builders in the mid-1960s he found that most were poor credit risks (Hutton 1970: 180-82). Part of the problem was that there was always a lot of 'churning', with many contractors entering and leaving the business every year. Annual data on building approvals in Newcastle provide a fairly precise picture. In 1955, a typical year, Walsh (1972: Table 9, p.103) calculates that there were 189 commercial builders. In that year 54 builders entered the local market and 80 left. In this sort of context, merchants could readily be left holding a lot of bad debt during the sort of cyclical downturns which so marked the industry. One such downturn followed the credit squeeze of 1960. As many small builders went bankrupt, or simply abandoned the business, suppliers of building materials, especially timber, lost money (Hutton 1970: 178; Lembke 1966: 49).

Faced with problems in a declining contractor market for timber, merchants had a number of options. They could try to win back larger builders by upgrading their service, diversify into more profitable lines, or seek other types of custom. In the end their response was determined primarily by the emergence after World War II by a large growing consumer market of amateur builders.



### *The rise of owner-building*

One of the more common ways in which homes had always been built in Australia, as in the United States, was for individuals to purchase a block of land and then to engage the services of a builder. This was, and still is, sometimes referred to as 'owner-building'. After the Second World War, however, many owners not only initiated the building of their homes but also did a good deal of the manual labour (Archer 1987: 191-94; Cuffley 1993: 75-80; Dingle 1997; Freeland 1972: 267-8; Greig 1995: 71-3; Holland 1988). In part they were compelled to do so by the shortage of skilled labour and their need to save money, although many also reported finding satisfaction in being able to design and make their own dwellings. By the early 1950s, owner-construction had become enough of a 'serious competitor' to builders that industry representatives expressed objections ('House Building in Australia', 1953: 27; 'Objection to Amateur Owner-Builders', 1950).



**Figure 5** Trends in owner-building in Australia, 1948-1965.

**Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1948-



One observer suggested that 'the adaptable Australian is applying "do-it-yourself" even more thoroughly than his American cousins', and available evidence suggests that this was in fact so ('It's the Day of "Do-It-Yourself"' 1953). From 1948 the Australian Bureau of Statistics has published data on the numbers of house completions attributable to their owners (Figure 5). Until 1952 these were unavailable for New South Wales and the Northern Territory, where owner-building was apparently more common than average. The trend in these regions, however, seems to have been the same as elsewhere. In the early 1950s, owner-built dwellings accounted for about one third of all new dwellings (more in New South Wales, and rather less in Western and South Australia). The national figure peaked at 39 per cent in 1954, and then declined slowly to 30 per cent in 1959, before falling more rapidly to 13 per cent in 1965. Available evidence indicates that the parallel surge of owner-construction in the United States came earlier, never reached as high a peak, and faded earlier. National statistics on owner-building in the United States are available only for 1949 and 1955. They show that in 1949 owner-builders accounted for about 25 per cent of all housing starts but by 1955/56 this had fallen to less than 15 per cent (Murphy 1957). My reading of U.S. trade magazines suggests that the peak of owner-construction occurred in about 1951, when it might have exceeded 30 per cent, but that it fell rapidly thereafter. Since owner-building was almost certainly more common in the United States than in Canada, and in North America than in Europe, it is probable that owner-builders played a larger role in Australia than in any other developed industrial nation.

Owner-builders were a challenge for the timber merchant. Since most had little in the way of construction experience, they preferred to use materials which were easily worked. It is clear that they especially favoured fibro (eg. Cuffley 1993; Pickett 1997). A noteworthy example was Tom Uren, later the Minister of Urban and Regional Development, who used fibro in building his home in Guildford, NSW in 1946 (Uren 1995: 74). New South Wales, the state with the highest rate of owner-building, also saw the largest proportion of new homes clad in fibro. Another material popular among owner-builders was hollow concrete blocks or solid concrete bricks. These were somewhat easier to lay than clay bricks, and the bricks could even be home made. This not only circumvented the shortage of building materials but also saved money (eg. Sweeny 1950; Tilley 1955). As a result, new machines for making concrete bricks were brought onto the market, while manuals were published which explained to amateurs how they could make and lay their own (eg. *Domus* 1954).<sup>10</sup> A few even followed the instructions of G.F. Middleton, a technical officer at the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station in New South Wales, and built homes out of

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Sherrott, who had a regular column for *Australian Home Beautiful*, 'Australia's How-To-Do-It' magazine, reckoned that many more Australians than Americans made their own blocks (Sherrott 1955). This is a dubious claim, since concrete blocks and cement bricks were never very common in Australia. I am indebted for this judgement to Graham Holland.

prise or adobe (Middleton 1953). The appeal of fibro and concrete blocks to owner-builders undoubtedly cost timber merchants some business.

On the whole, however, the rise of the owner-builder presented timber merchants with an excellent opportunity. Apart from being more readily available, timber was much easier to work with than brick. Moreover power tools, notably the electric drill and the circular saw, made carpentry work much easier still (Figure 3). There was an enormous boom in demand for power tools. Between 1948/49 and 1951/52 alone, production of small electrical motors, 'the power unit of the typical handyman's tool', more than doubled ('It's the Day of "Do-It-Yourself"' 1953). By 1955, power tool rental services were established in several of the larger cities, including Sydney and Melbourne ('Power Tools Rental Services at Last' 1955). In the following year *Home Beautiful* introduced a power tool section, in which it observed that 'the popularity of power tools in the home workshop is now so great that hardly a month goes by without some unit or accessory making its appearance on the Australian market' ('Power Tool News' 1956a). Later that year Black and Decker, importers of the lightest, cheapest and most popular of the power drills and saws, announced that the surge in Australian demand had prompted them to establish a factory in Melbourne ('Power Tool News' 1956b). Overwhelmingly these tools — drills, sanders, saws, lathes, 'buzzers' for planing, and impressive all-purpose machines such as the Shopsmith — were intended for woodworking. In helping owners to build their own homes they also helped create business for the timber merchant.

The greater opportunity for the merchant lay in the latent demand of owner-builders for packaged services. Amateurs had less tolerance than contractors for having to shop in different places for different materials. It was not necessarily the case that consumers had less time than contractors. The problem was more that, without knowing who to buy from, every building material presented a new set of problems of comparison shopping. It was much easier to use a merchant who offered a package deal; ideally, perhaps, the cost-conscious might like to compare several package deals, but in the absence of choice might pay extra for the convenience of one-stop shopping. Here, then, was a business opportunity.

A particular problem for the timber merchant was that a number of the new 'handyman' customers were not, in fact, men. During the war, many women had been compelled to undertake at least simple domestic repairs, and a manual was published specifically to help them (Domus 1944). After 1945, they continued to take a strong interest in home building, design, and decoration, and played a significant role in the increase of DIY (Figure 6). As Alex Smith (1956: 42) observed in *Home Beautiful*, 'Do-it-yourself...has had an unexpected angle — the extent to which women are rivalling men as No.1 "handyman."' When the magazine published a series of articles on how to use power tools, it included a significant number of illustrations which showed women, not in coy poses but doing serious work (eg. 'Know Your Tools - 3: The 1/4 in. Drill' 1953). Similar sorts of images may be found in a variety of contemporary magazines (eg. Sharp 1961; cf. Archer 1987:



188). Contemporary accounts of owner-building usually suggested that men did most of the work, with women 'helping out' ('Helped build own home' 1951). In some cases, however, women took on an equal share of the labour, especially in situations where the man was away at work during the day. When she and her husband built their home in Dee Why, Sydney, for example, Mrs. Voorderhake 'found that she could clear land and trowel cement with the best of them' (Burns 1961: 35). At the extreme, some women did everything, as was the case with Mrs. F.G. Melvin, a north Queensland mother of seven, who had built her own home, apparently while her husband was on war service (Home Builders Advisory 1948: 2). A slightly more typical example, though still unusual, was that of 'Miss Mary Hardy, a middle 30's self-employed public typist' who lived alone with her mother ('Two Talented Power Tools People' 1959). Secretary-treasurer of the Shopsmith Club of Australia, and editor of its monthly bulletin, she had used a Shopsmith to single-handedly remodel her kitchen.



**Figure 6** Many women were actively involved in homebuilding and DIY. They made up a growing proportion of the timber merchant's customers and provided an incentive for merchants to build showrooms and alter their sales techniques

**Source:** *The Australian Home Beautiful*, Nov 1953.

If women undertook some of the manual work of construction, they played an even larger role in shopping for materials.<sup>11</sup> For example, when the Giles' built their 2-bedroom fibro home in Gympsea Bay, NSW, Mrs. Giles supervised the work of subcontractors, and 'shopped for the door and window fittings, the many spacious cupboards, and built in wardrobes...' as well as the 'unusual steel fence and porch surround and the doors made of cypress pine' (Gye 1948: 36). Some owner-builders seem to have believed that women had an advantage as buyers. Women were more experienced consumers, and arguably might also use their sex to advantage. In 1948 *Australian Women's Weekly* reported that when the Reynolds' began to build their 'dream house' in Sandringham, Melbourne, Ada was 'the chief chaser' of materials. Her husband Jim reckoned that 'the feminine touch works wonders...My wife has determination and a pretty smile. We got enough for a house plus a future garage' ('The house that Jim built with Ada's help' 1950).

Although some women might have felt comfortable shopping in male environments such as brick and timber yards, most surely did not. These were not the clean and tidy spaces of the department or grocery store. They were run by men who were accustomed to dealing, in a fairly rough and ready way, with other men. This issue had already been confronted by lumber dealers in North America, as a Canadian visitor R.C. McMillan noted in a talk that he gave several times to members of the Australian timber industry in 1965. McMillan could speak from experience. President of the British Columbia Manufacturers' Association, he was also Sales Manager for Crown Zellerbach Building Materials Limited, one of the larger timber and building supply companies in Canada, with more than fifty retail dealerships. He started by noting that 'today we have a very important specifier — the housewife', and then continued on a personal note: 'My wife wouldn't go down to the wharf...but she would go down to a nice area around a Supermarket where there's a beautiful retail lumber dealer shop and wander around there and spend my money. Now I sometimes curse it but nevertheless this is good merchandising technique and here is the need for making a change if this is the type of business you want to go after' (McMillan 1965: 73). As much as the content of his observations, his style of humour says much about the male character, and gendered assumptions, of the timber trade in this period.

The point should have been well-taken. Con Lembke recalls that in the late 1950s most timber yards were still 'rabbit warrens' which were 'not designed in any way' even for handymen, and 'if you were a woman you didn't go in there'.<sup>12</sup> In this respect timber merchants were at a disadvantage in relation to hardware or, potentially, department stores. *Home Beautiful*

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<sup>11</sup>. Oral histories undertaken by Graham Holland indicate that while few women undertook construction, many more were involved in buying materials, and in home design. (Graham Holland, personal communication).

<sup>12</sup>. Telephone conversation with Con Lembke, Sydney, 5 May 1997.



reported that when Clyde and Edna Jones built their house in Templestowe, Melbourne, 'he was the tradesman, she bought the materials', which included plaster sheets, window frames, bricks, masonite, and the hardwood flooring. ('Bungalow Built by Two' 1954). She 'battled and bargained for materials', doing '90 per cent of the buying'. Significantly, she observed that she 'had never been closer to the building industry than a hardware store counter.' Women were buying materials, and their first instinct might not be to go to the timber merchant. Therein lay a significant challenge.

### *The emerging demand for credit*

If timber merchants were to satisfy owner-customers they would also have to come to terms with changing attitudes towards credit. Traditionally, when such customers had made up only a small part of the merchant's business, they had not normally been offered credit of any sort. In 1952 George Topham warned aspiring owner-builders what to expect when they bought their materials. In a step-by-step advice manual entitled *Be Your Own Builder*, he observed that 'not being a recognized builder with trade contacts you will probably be unable to obtain goods on credit' (Topham 1952: 53). Other advisors to the amateur builder emphasised the same thing (Burnett 1949: 41). As the Check Valuer and Inspector of Constructions for the Registry of Cooperative Building Societies, Topham was in a good position to know what he was talking about: among the lending institutions, building societies were probably most receptive to, and familiar with, the needs of the owner-builder market ('Financing Your Own Home' 1949: Lloyd 1957: 8; cf. Hill 1959).<sup>13</sup> In the late 1940s and early 1950s this was not a significant issue. With the experience of the Depression still fresh in many people's minds, popular attitudes towards consumer debt were cautious, and probably more so than in the United States. In Australia in 1947, personal debt was equivalent to only fourteen per cent of personal after-tax income, two thirds the level in the United States (Institute of Public Affairs 1958: 55). Leaving aside mortgage debt, the difference was much greater. Hire purchase debt for consumer goods accounted for four per cent of after-tax income in the United States, but only about one per cent in Australia, and almost all of that for cars. It is impossible to say what proportion of this difference was due to national differences in the availability of, as opposed to the demand for credit. Either way, however, it does suggest that for some years after the war DIY customers would not have expected merchants to provide goods on the 'never-never'.

The credit situation changed rapidly during the 1950s. By 1957 personal debt as a proportion of after-tax income had grown rapidly both in the United States and in Australia, reaching 47 per cent and 36 per cent

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13 On this issue there does not seem to have been any significant regional differences. Topham's judgement is confirmed by John Beecroft's recollections regarding the credit policy of Newport Timbers, Melbourne, in the early 1950s, and also by Moore's understanding of the policies of Whittakers, Perth. Telephone conversation with Bryce Moore, 3 June 1997.

respectively (Institute of Public Affairs 1958: 55). Although Australia still lagged behind, the rate of growth was actually greater here than in the United States. Clearly buying habits, and with them attitudes, were changing (Whitwell 1989: 34). Increasingly, prospective home owners were willing to take on mortgage and other debts. In 1957, the author of an article in *Home Beautiful* noted that although the marketing efforts of Australian builders was more restrained than that of their American counterparts, 'Australians have abandoned their reluctance to buy on hire purchase' ('Houses off the Hook' 1957). Increasingly, if timber merchants wanted to attract owner-builders, male or female, they were going to have to offer 'terms'.

#### 4 The Response of the Merchants to Commercial Builders

After 1945 the timber merchant faced both opportunities and challenges. His best opportunity was the rise of owner-building in the late 1940s, and its persistence at high levels until the end of the 1950s. His greatest challenge was to maintain his position as middleman in a situation where both sawmillers and builders were coming to recognize advantages to direct selling. He was slow to deal with both.

Faced with the growth of direct selling after 1952, the merchant's instinctive response had been to try to secure his position through price and exclusive trading agreements with suppliers. Binding agreements such as the Timber Mills Scheme were declared illegal, but less formal arrangements apparently continued, even in New South Wales. There, *Construction*, the weekly journal of the Master Builders, included a regular 'Barometer of Prices' section in which advertisers listed their current prices. Thus in 1959 it reported the going rate for various types and grades of CSR Fibrock, Hardie Fibrolite, and Wunderlich Durabestos. Under the heading for 'timber', however, were reported the generic rates for different grades of hard and softwoods that had been provided by the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants' Association. Moreover, builders were further referred to the 'official list price' for conditions of sale. Clearly a city-wide price list existed. Whether, and how, it was enforced is an open question. Lists and trade arrangements worked in moderately prosperous times, but were vulnerable in downturns, such as that of 1960-62. They were an increasingly ineffective basis on which to organise the timber industry.

One of the problems with price maintenance schemes is that they alienated builders, thereby playing into the hands of the manufacturers of timber 'substitutes'. The industry was aware of this. During the credit squeeze of 1960 its promotional arm, the Timber Development Association, commissioned a study to examine the state of the industry. Questionnaires were sent to builders and architects across the country. Those conducting the survey heard more complaints than praise. One of the most persistent complaints was that prices were too high (A.N.Z. Bank 1961: 133). This was predictable enough, and possibly unfair, since profit margins for both mills and retail yards at that time were apparently very slim. In part the problem was that of image: because merchants had so obviously attempted to fix



prices builders assumed they had been successful. Thus one contractor observed that 'there was a need to place the industry on a competitive basis, rather than have the present arrangement where millers and timber merchants have made price arrangements to keep prices on a high level' (A.N.Z. Bank 1961: 134). As Lembke (1961: 2) observed in commenting on this report, such criticisms clearly indicated 'misunderstanding — and even mistrust of the timber industry.' Faced with suspicion, merchants were not in a strong position to maintain the loyalty of those builders who could make other arrangements.

If price was an issue so was quality. Of course timber varies in its characteristics, more so than most building materials. The industry was aware that the key to effective marketing was a consistent system of grade-marking. One of the recommendations of the Productivity Team that visited in the United States in 1954 had been that better grading practises be adopted (Australian Building Industry Productivity Team 1955:74). It would appear, however, that the industry was slow to respond, and practices remained very variable. Those who undertook the mail survey in 1960 heard many complaints about the inconsistent quality of timber that merchants sold. One respondent observed 'at the present time, timber merchants depend on the builder and joiner to cull out the poor quality material from the first quality, although charging for "selected quality"' (A.N.Z.Bank 1961: 129). If only implicitly, Lembke (1961: 2) acknowledged the justice of such criticism.

Complaints about price and quality depend upon expectations, and to some extent may be discounted. Their persistence, however, indicates that merchants had a problem. In the early 1970s a very comprehensive study of the timber market in four states was undertaken by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Again, builders and architects were surveyed. The one hundred and eighty-seven builders that responded had erected about 33,700 dwellings in 1971/72, accounting for about 37 per cent of all new dwellings in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia. In response to the question as to whether they felt themselves to be 'well-serviced' by the timber industry most replied no, suggesting that service was worse than in other sectors of the building materials industry, including bricks and concrete. Criticisms were especially strong in Victoria, where one builder referred to the typical timber salesman's 'take it or leave it' attitude (Wymond 1973-4a: 28) In South Australia and New South Wales, responses were more mixed. Many praised the efforts of the state timber development associations, but suggested, in the words of one builder, that this 'good service...was often not backed up by suppliers.' (Wymond 1973-4b: 28) (original emphasis) In a period when they could no longer afford to do so, too many merchants were taking their contractor customers for granted.

There was one field in which some merchants did respond quite effectively to builders' needs. The experience of the late 1940s and early 1950s had showed that the market for wholly factory-made dwellings was quite limited. In North America, however, by the late 1940s many builders

were using partially prefabricated components, especially roof trusses (Figure 7). They were encouraged to do so by the lumber dealer associations which developed building methods, such as the manufacture of trusses, for which their members could provide materials and services (National Retail Lumber Dealers Association 1947). Manufactured off-site and engineered to detailed specifications, trusses depended on the use of steel plates to tie together a structure of wooden struts. Their use took off with the development of 'gang-nailing', whereby the steel plates were punched to form a series ('gang') of nail-like projections, which were then pressed into the timber. This saved time, and created a very strong structure. The method was patented by a Florida-based company, Automated Building Components (ABC). By the early 1960s trusses, many of them gang-nailed, were being used 'all over the U.S.A. and Canada' and it had become 'difficult for [the builder] to remain competitive without using them to the fullest extent' (Stern 1962: 79). Many lumber dealers had seen their opportunity and were supplying them to their contractor customers (Figure 8).

Builders in Australia were slower to adopt prefabricated roof trusses, even though in the early 1960s these offered savings of 40-50 pounds (value) on the cost of a roof. There were certainly a number who were using them as early as 1957 (Solomon 1957), but they did not catch on very quickly (cf. Boyd 1959). Some of the larger builders began to manufacture their own, but apparently ran into difficulties acquiring the necessary engineering expertise.<sup>14</sup> Walsh (1972: 41) indicates that by 1965 prefabricated trusses were being used on about 20 per cent of all houses in New South Wales. Significantly, however, although he states that large builders were active in pre-cutting, he does not specifically mention that they were making trusses. With this potential demand, the more forward-looking timber merchants began to respond. Possibly the first of these were the Burwood Timber Mills in Melbourne. Late in 1960, in the midst of a major business downturn, they established a Building Components Division to make trusses, interior non-load bearing walls, and ready-hung doors ('Supply the Package...' 1962: 57-59). Within eighteen months they reported that they had increased their business turnover, since it increased the attractiveness of wood, and had helped them to keep their contractor business. It seems that by 1962 a number of timber companies across the country were beginning to take 'a greater interest in the factory manufacture of trusses' ('Supply the Package...' 1962: 46). The largest of these was the Kauri group, a company with diverse interests in Australia and New Zealand, which in May of 1962 was planning to establish truss plants in every state ('Kauri Group Moves Into Roof Trusses' 1962; cf. Roche, Dargavel, and Mills 1993). Most merchants, however, were slow to follow this example. In 1961 a report to the Timber Development Association had argued that the timber trade should be providing more of the sorts of 'half-fabricates which can be obtained in steel, aluminium and even concrete' (A.N.Z. Bank 1961: 134). The following

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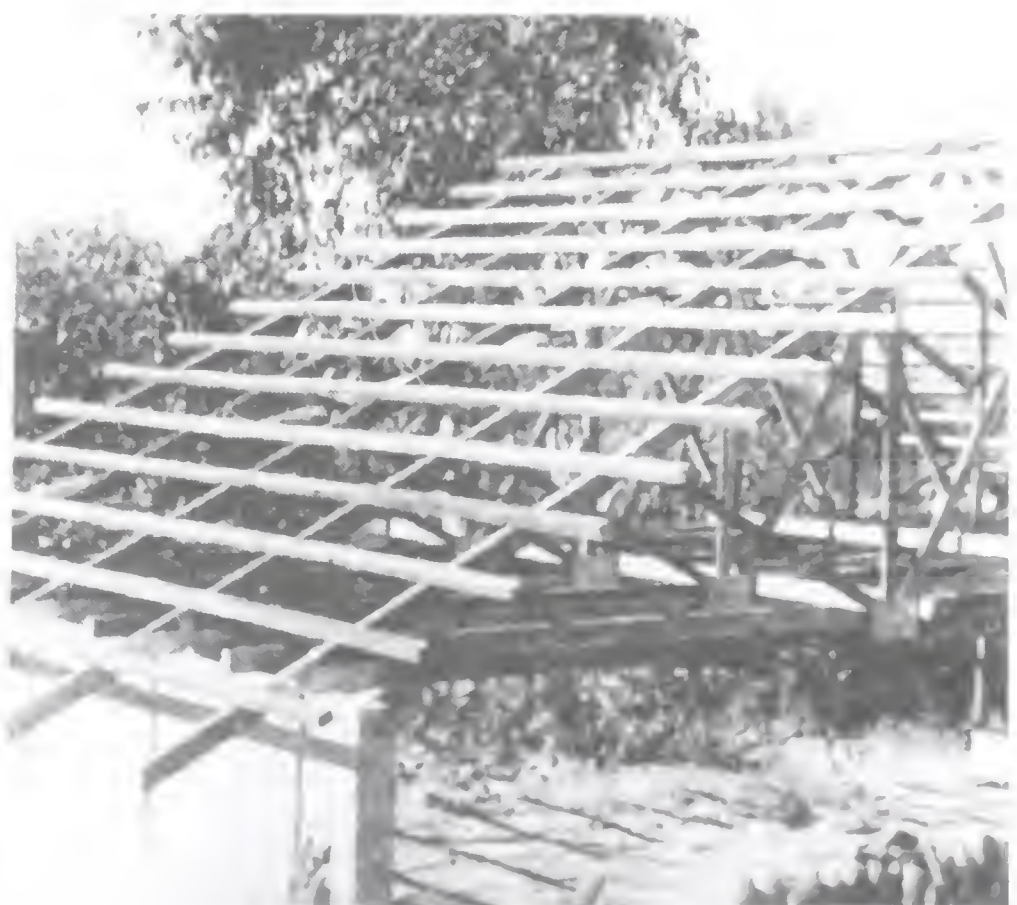
14. Telephone conversation with Con Lembke, Sydney, 27 June 1997.



year the director of the Association's New South Wales Branch judged that most trusses were being made by builders, while in 1963 he commented that 'you can still count on your fingers the timber companies that are marketing trusses' (Barnes 1962; 1963: 17).

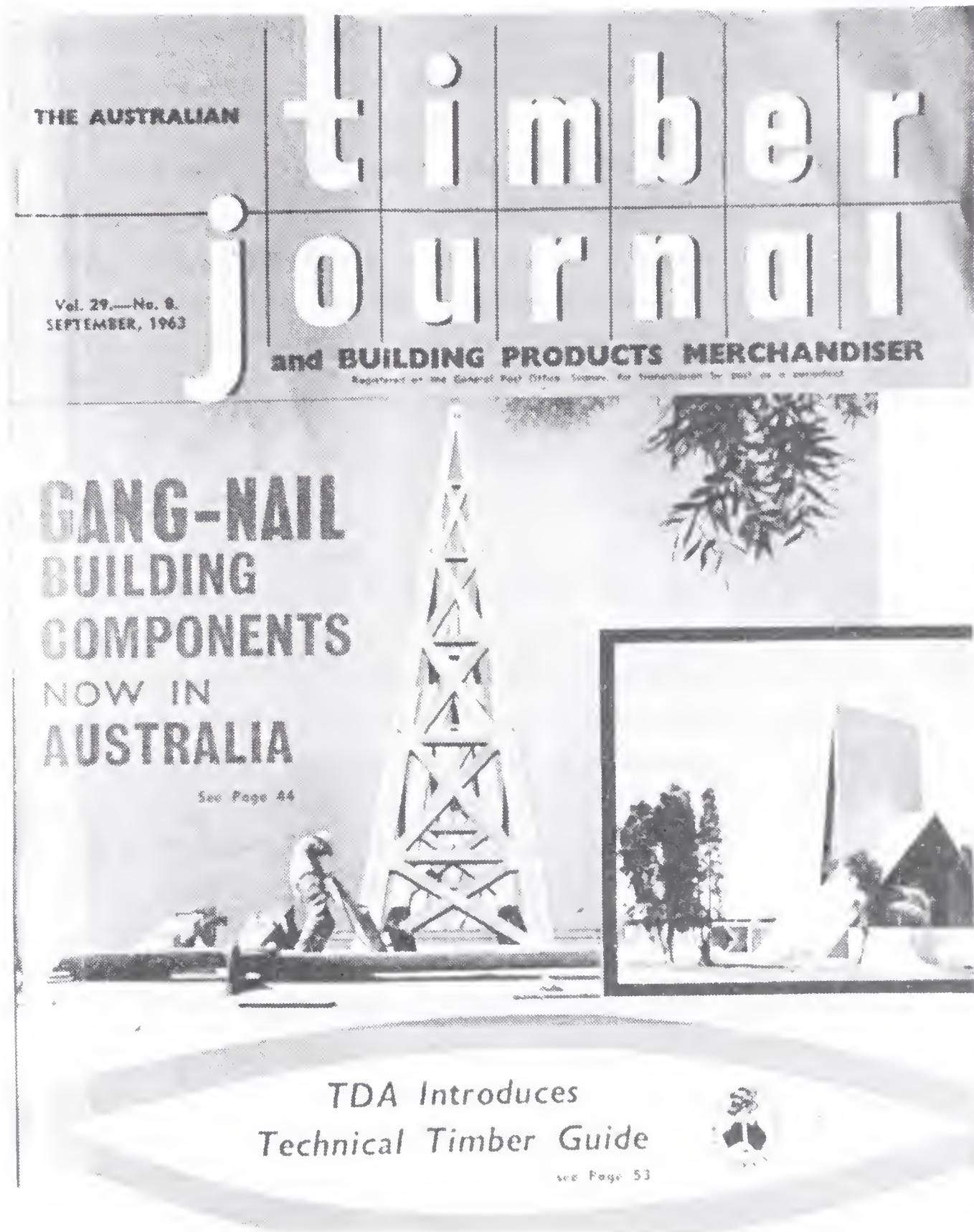
It may be that merchants were slow to manufacture and promote trusses, but in general it was builders, and especially carpenters, that held things back. As a representative of the Kauri group observed in 1962, although local authorities and lending institutions soon came to accept trusses, 'carpenters are not taking to this new construction method at all' ('Kauri Group Moves Into Roof Trusses' 1962: 67). For carpenters the new technology meant de-skilling, fewer jobs, and lower pay. Since they made up the largest single building trade, and were greatly overrepresented among the ranks of contractors and subcontractors, in many cases it was they, not timber merchants, who delayed adoption of this technique. In this regard the experience of Hynes in Queensland is significant. Following a visit to the United States, J.R.L. Hyne entered into a franchise agreement with ABC for the right to use gang-nail technology. His company was geared up for the truss business by the mid-1960s, but demand did not really take off until the 1970s. It was only at that point that the company was able to open four new truss plants in rapid succession, at Rockhampton (1971), Townsville (1972), Bundaberg (1975) and then Brisbane itself (1978) (Hyne 1980: 72-74).

Roof trusses in position and ready for testing under normal rain load loading at the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station, Sydney.



**Figure 7** Various experiments were made with truss roofing after World War II. Lightweight and strong, trusses lent themselves to prefabrication, whether by large builders or timber merchants.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal*, Jan, 1959.



**Figure 8** The technique of gang-nailing was imported under license from the United States. Featured in *The Australian Timber Journal* in 1963, it gained ground steadily during the 1960s and 1970s.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal*, Sept. 1963 (cover).

Those timber companies that entered the truss market in the 1960s were a forward-looking minority. They established an annual 'gang-nail seminar' in 1964. At their second annual meeting Con Lembke offered critical comments on the conservatism of the timber trade, but specifically excepted those in the audience (Lembke 1966: 41). In fact it was not necessary for all merchants to enter the business as manufacturers. In 1965 a large manufacturing facility was established by a timber merchant as Roof Trusses Pty in Gosford. Their plans were to serve the greater Sydney metropolitan area using a network of ten, established merchants ('Truss Plant



Serves Market 50 Miles Away' 1965). As manufacturers or as distributors, then, by the 1960s a significant minority of merchants were seriously addressing the changing needs of the contractor.

## 5 The Response of Merchants to the Consumer Market

As timber sales stagnated, and sawmills drew off their contractor business, timber merchants began to take the consumer market more seriously. The key was diversification. To satisfy owner-builders, and then the growing market for home remodelling, merchants had to offer a much wider range of goods and services.

### *Kits*

There had always been some degree of consumer demand for diversified goods and services. In Australia, as in North America, many home owners had acquired their land first, and then arranged to have a home built. A small minority of merchants had been satisfying this type of customer by offering to sell the consumer everything. In southern Queensland, for example, several companies were doing this in the early 1940s. At that time an annual for those who intended to build was begun, apparently in the Brisbane area.<sup>15</sup> The 1942 edition carried advertisements from no fewer than four timber companies which offered, in effect, package deals (Home Builders Annual 1942). Chapman and Carter, who described themselves as 'Timber and Hardware and Plywood Distributors', offered in addition fibro-cement, paints, and builders hardware. Three others claimed to be able to provide anything the aspiring builder might need. Under the slogan 'Everything for Building', Campbells of Creek Street argued that 'you can purchase all your building supplies from one source — and save time, money and worry'. Queensland Pastoral Supplies offered 'everything from the stump caps to the furniture,' while Hancock and Gore asserted that their 'service to you, as a prospective householder is complete' and urged their potential customers to 'specify Hancock and Gore Ltd. to your builder or architect.' (Figure 9)

It would seem that a few merchants had been offering this sort of service for quite some time. In 1942, Queensland Pastoral Supplies proposed that customers should write for their 'Big 20th Edition General Catalogue', suggesting that they had been providing a wide range of supplies throughout the interwar period. In the Melbourne area the same seems to have been true of N.L. Rigg, which in the 1930s styled itself as a 'Hardware and Timber Merchant.' In 1933 Rigg published a *Book of Homes* and also a *Catalogue* in which it offered a complete range of materials together with an architectural service which sold plans and specifications, or which would draw plans to the customers' own specifications (Rigg 1933). The catalogue included

15 I have been unable to find out anything about this magazine. In 1942 its local advertisers were from the Brisbane area. By 1949 its local emphasis, and perhaps its publishing base, had shifted to Sydney.

illustrations of their hardwood timber mill as well as their fibrous plaster factory. Probably the longest-established operation of this kind, however, was George Hudson. Their 1919 catalogue of *Australian bungalows* was apparently their eleventh (Hudson 1919).

# Everything

## THAT GOES INTO BUILDING A HOME!

### HARDWARE

Hancock & Gore Ltd. feature a modern up-to-date Hardware Store—everything for the builder or the handiman—all the finest lines at competitive prices

### TAYLOR'S PAINTS

Hancock & Gore Ltd. are wholesale distributors for Taylor's Prepared Paints. Taylor's comes in 32 shades and colours, built on a new resin base that suits local conditions. Taylor's Prepared Paints have been incorporated with British Paints

### PANELLING

Hancock & Gore are famous for their Plywood Panelling. Lennon's Hotel, Brisbane, features Hancock & Gore panelling.

### TIMBER & HARDWOODS

The finest timber and the finest hardwoods come from Hancock & Gore's mills. Hardwood is kiln-dried by the latest process, 32 kilns are operating

### BONDWOOD

Bondwood is the laminated plywood that is stronger than wood itself—rot-proof, borer-resisting, fire-resisting and absolutely water-proof. Bondwood is exclusively manufactured by Hancock & Gore Ltd.

### FLUSH DOORS

Hancock & Gore Ltd. make a feature of semi-solid Flush Doors. Beautiful veneers in the finest timber. These doors are the latest in modern building

### JOINERY

Hancock & Gore Joinery Department can handle any job from panelling for Lennon's Hotel to a small kitchen table—prices are moderate

HANCOCK & GORE can supply everything for the home—the timber, the plywood panelling, the wall linings, the flush doors, all the bathroom fittings, the plumbing requisites, paints and varnishes, the fittings—everything to the last tack. Their service to you, as a prospective householder is complete. Now specify Hancock & Gore Ltd. to your builder or architect.

And when you want to repaint your home think of Hancock & Gore's Hardware Department and Taylor's Prepared Paints—British Paint that never does such shabby tricks as peeling and lifting. When you are wanting gardening tools ring J 1331 and ask Hancock & Gore to deliver your requirements.

# HANCOCK

and **GORE** Ltd.

IPSWICH ROAD, WOOLLOONGABBA

J 1331

**Figure 9** Like Hancock and Gore Ltd in Brisbane, a few timber and hardware merchants had long sold a wide range of building products to professional and amateur builders.

**Source:** *Home Builders Annual*, 1942.



Implied in these various forms of advertising were varying types of operations. Chapman and Carter could sell the main items that a builder would need; others could supply everything, making up a unique order for each customer; Hudson was offering a number of standardised kits.

It was the kit business which seems to have expanded most rapidly after World War II although, unfortunately, not much has been written about it. In the United States the mail-order kit industry was quite active throughout the first half of this century, although it suffered badly during the 1930s, and it has been quite well documented (Gowans, 1986; Ward and Jandl 1990). The size and character of the Australian kit industry is more obscure, but it is clear the number of manufacturers increased rapidly after 1945. In the mid-1950s, the pink pages in the Sydney and Melbourne telephone directories actually included a specific section for 'building — prefabricated and/or ready cut'. The 1959 listing for Melbourne included thirty-two companies. A number, apparently, were not primarily in the business of making houses. For example, Progress Engineering offered 'steel framed farm and factory buildings'. Among the seventeen that indicated their specialisation, however, at least five were probably making dwellings: C.A. Croker ('Pre-cut bungalows and garages erected'), Johnson Bros. ('Pre-cut buildings'), Ligar Timber ('Pre-cut homes, garages, bungalows'), Jim Styles ('Australia's Leading Home Builders and Joinery Specialists'), and Variety Manufacturing Co. ('Garages. Bungalows. Carports. Supplied or Erected. Cash or Terms'). It is not exactly clear what sorts of structures these companies were advertising. In Australia 'bungalow' is an ambiguous term. It does not always mean a single-storey house, but can denote a very small rear dwelling. It is clear, however, that most if not all of these five companies were selling pre-cut houses.

Although the yellow pages began to identify kit manufacturers separately in the mid-1950s, it seems that the boom period had come somewhat earlier. For a time, one of the larger companies in the Melbourne area was Stowell Timber Industries, of Stowell, Victoria. In 1948 they began making partially prefabricated homes. They did their own milling, kiln drying, moulding, joinery, and pre-cutting of frames. They also made hardware and fibrous plaster, which was installed before the house was shipped in sections. With 200 employees they could produce a house a day. ('Factory-built brick veneer houses' 1956; cf. 'Timber Man Offers a New Kind of Home' 1955). By 1958, however, it seems that they were no longer in business.

The best market for kits and 'prefabs' was Sydney. In 1952 a survey of kit manufacturers that was published in the Sydney-based magazine *Australian House and Garden* identified and discussed fifteen companies there (Roberts 1952). The line between kit and manufactured homes sometimes became blurred. Roberts, the author of the survey made a distinction between 'pre-cut', as opposed to partially and wholly prefabricated dwellings. Pre-cuts were the true kits, comparable to the mail-order homes that had been offered for decades in North America by

companies like Sears and Aladdin. Timber was cut and labelled, and (usually) all hardware, fixtures and fittings were provided. In Sydney, apart from George Hudson, the main companies in 1952 seem to have been A.H. Pikett; Granville's; G.E. Brown and Son; Campbell and Denning; and Northwood's (Roberts 1952). At the other extreme were the prefabs which were completely assembled in a factory and then shipped to the site where only minimal assembly was required. The leading companies in Sydney were Vandycke; Woodall and Montague; F.R. Wolstenholme; and Ridley's (Roberts 1952), although G.E. Brown also made prefabs under the name of Leichhardt Constructions.<sup>16</sup> Occupying an amorphous middle territory were companies that prefabricated some building components, including wall segments, but which left a fair amount of assembly work for the site. Norman Smith; Hutcherson Brothers; Monocrete (the only concrete 'kits'), and (again) Brown and Son, offered various versions of these intermediate-style dwellings.

The list of companies discussed in Roberts' survey was certainly not complete. Apparently, it included only those who were willing to ship their homes (at least) state-wide. In addition, there were probably quite a number of smaller merchants who served a more local market. Significantly, in Topham's manual for owner-builders, also published in the Sydney area in 1952, two of the four companies that advertised kits were missing from Roberts' survey (Topham 1952). One, Nelson-Williams of Marrickville, pointed out that 'every piece' of their 'cut-to-fit' homes was 'marked where it is to go. Complete plans, specifications, and working details supplied' (Figure 10). More modestly, below a sketch of modern-looking fibro bungalow, J.A. Letchford of Peakhurst stated with simple urgency 'pre-cut cottages and garages for immediate delivery' (Figure 11). Letchford's, and quite possibly other companies, were willing to cut frames to the customer's own plan, though presumably this cost more. Quite a number of companies, mostly timber merchants, had soon caught on to the idea of serving the consumer market with kits.

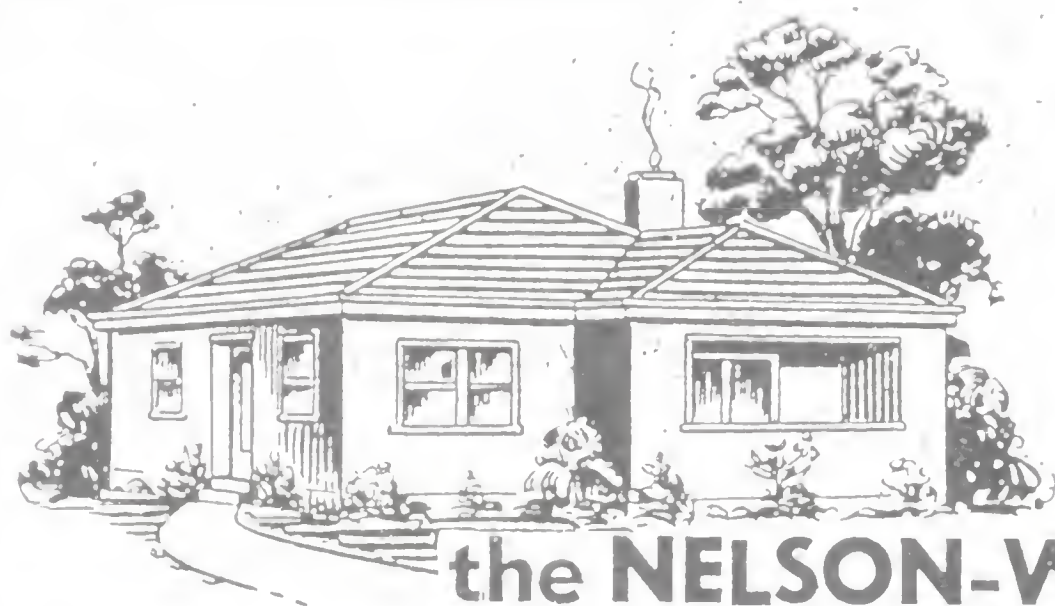
In the late 1940s and early 1950s it was above all the pure kit which had the greatest appeal to the owner-builder. The completely prefabricated dwelling embodied more factory labour, and so of course kits were cheaper. The largest companies (George Hudson; G.E. Brown) appear to have been those that made kits. They targetted the owner-builder market, both through their pink page advertising and also in publications such as Topham's manual. Several contemporary accounts refer to the way in which amateur builders made effective use of pre-cuts (Kelly 1957: 400). A survey of housing conditions among immigrants, for example, noted the way that Dutch families in a cooperative venture at Villawood had made their various selections from the Hudson catalogue (Appleyard 1963: 24-25). It may be significant that, in the process, they passed over the option of buying a locally prefabricated dwelling, produced in Villawood by Vandyckes (cf.

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16. See their advertisement in *Australian House and Garden*, July 1952, p.63.



Allport 1980: 54). The author of a recent study of Sydney's western suburbs notes that her parents also bought a fibro-clad Hudson kit soon after the war (Powell 1993: 70-71).



## BUILD YOUR OWN HOME

### the NELSON-WILLIAMS WAY

● Hundreds of these Homes have been supplied to Country Centres through the Lands Department and Trading Banks.

Cut-to-fit of the best materials — Simple to erect. Every piece marked where it is to go. Complete plans, specifications and full working details supplied. You could do the work yourself although you are not a tradesman.

Full range of designs, so write for illustrated Folder today. Quick delivery to early inquirers and firm Price 'F.O.R., Sydney'.

Only One Address:—

**NELSON & WILLIAMS PTY. LTD.**

"The Cut-to-Fit Home Specialists"

151-163 EDGEWARE ROAD, MARRICKVILLE — LA3487.

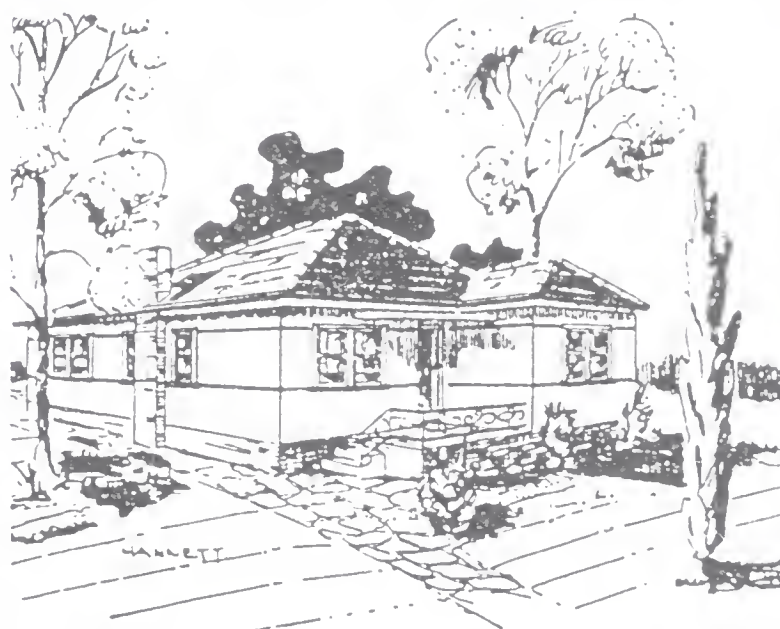
**Figure 10** Nelson and Williams were one of a number of Australian companies that manufactured kit homes and marketed them to amateurs in the late 1940s and 1950s. The Sydney area contained an especially large number of kit manufacturers since an unusually high proportion of homes in New South Wales were owner-built.

Source: Topham (1952).

There is no way to judge exactly how many kit homes were manufactured. Evidently they numbered in the thousands, between 1945 and the early 1960s, by which time they seem to have largely faded from the market. If, as seems likely, most were produced and sold in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it may be that their appeal declined as timber merchants in general began to provide better service to the consumer market. The point should not be overstated. It is clear that at no time did kits satisfy more than a small fraction of the owner-builder market. For every contemporary

# Your Home by LETCHEFORD

*the original  
Pre-Cut Specialists  
is the best investment  
proved over the years  
by satisfied customers*



*Or, we cut to  
your own plan*

BUILDING SOCIETY MEMBERS FINANCED  
ON £50

Write, Phone, or call for Further Information (or  
arrange an Evening Interview with our  
Representative.)

## J. A. LETCHFORD & CO.

Joiners and Pre-cut Home Manufacturers

3-9 Norman St., Peakhurst

Phone LA 9198

OPEN SATURDAY MORNING FOR YOUR  
CONVENIENCE.

**Figure 11** Some  
kit manufacturers  
were willing to cut  
timber to customer  
specifications, a  
traditional service  
provided by timber  
merchants.

**Source:** *Australian  
House and Garden*,  
Sept. 1952.



account which refers to a kit there are many which make it clear that the usual practise was for owners to shop around for materials.<sup>17</sup> From the consumer's point of view the main problem with the kit was that, since it embodied a good deal of factory labour, it was more expensive than a house built by the owner from scratch. Moreover, all building materials had to be paid for in one go, instead of being able to buy and build as needs and finances allowed. For these reasons, most owner-builders relied upon local merchants, and for about fifteen years after 1945 they were in the market for other sorts of package deals.

### *When diversification occurred*

Apart from the kit manufacturers, most timber merchants were slow to respond to the new consumer market, for this meant breaking the habits of a lifetime. Accustomed to dealing with fairly well-informed contractors who bought in large quantities, the average merchant found it difficult to adapt to amateur builders who needed help in making a series of small purchases as their extended building schedule allowed. As C.R. Lloyd observed drily in retrospect, in the early 1950s 'retail sales had substantial nuisance value' (Lloyd 1965: 35).

It is difficult to pin down exactly when a significant number of merchants began to change the way they operated. A review of the *Australian Timber Journal* might suggest that the workshops offered by Art Hood in Canberra and Brisbane in 1959 were a critical turning point. Certainly this was the view expressed by a number of those who attended the workshops, including their organiser, Con Lembke (1959). Indeed, Hood's visit prompted Lembke to copy the *American Lumberman*, and in November 1959 he added '*Building Products Merchandiser*' to the name of his journal. Several merchants expressed strongly favourable views. For example W.J. Sharp, representing the Burwood Timber Mills, Melbourne, is reported to have said that 'Art opened up new horizons...'; C.S. Beck, of Beck and Co. Sydney, commented 'I am sure the workshops were a turning point...in the marketing of timber and allied products'; while J. Leon, President of the Retail Merchants' Association of New South Wales, enthused that he had just been exposed to 'the greatest collection of ideas to hit the timber industry in years.' (Lembke 1959: 8, 11, 12). Several merchants indicated that the workshops had given them specific ideas which they intended to implement when they got back home. F.J. Trotter, of Millar's in Perth, suggested that 'it was no news to me that the consumer market has a terrific potential, but Art has shown me just how to go after it' (Lembke 1959: 5). Significantly, in subsequent years, the *Journal* reported on innovations that dealers had made, apparently as a direct result of Hood's workshops. In the Sydney area, for example, Ron Harris, as well as Hayman and Ellis, soon moved in directions

17. This is consistent with the evidence of oral history interviews that are currently being carried out by Graham Holland in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, extracts from which were broadcast on June 29 and July 6, 1997, Graham Holland, personal communication, June 21, 1997.

which Hood had suggested, while in Melbourne Station Timber Yards were also influenced ('Sydney Merchant Building...' 1960: 43; 'Campbelltown Merchant...' 1961; 'Today we are Merchandisers...' 1963).

A closer reading of dealers' comments at the time, however, suggests a more qualified conclusion. Quite a number made it clear that they had already begun to do what Hood was recommending. H.R. Hancock (of Hancock and Gore, Brisbane) said that Hood had 'confirmed the wisdom of our entry into the Home Improvement Extended Credit field'; R.N. Tilley, speaking for the sawmillers and merchants of Western Australia, commented that 'a number of my members have, indeed, been practising...quite a few of his merchandising techniques'; speaking for the the Timber Merchants' Association of Melbourne and Suburbs, C.A. Grimwood agreed that Hood had 'confirmed much of what we are attempting to do in the Victorian timber trade' (Lembke 1959: 7, 12, 14). Hood was charismatic. Leading off morning sessions with a prayer, passionately committed to his subject, and always ready with a joke, he made a great personal impression. Con Lembke has suggested that he was 'almost treated like God over here.'<sup>18</sup> For many merchants his workshops were a conversion experience; others, it seems, merely went away with their faith confirmed.

The idea that the events of 1959 confirmed, rather than initiated, a change in the timber trade is supported by the more systematic evidence of the telephone pink pages. Available annually, these usually listed all merchants, these being conveniently grouped together.<sup>19</sup> Here merchants made their services known in two ways, through informative advertising 'boxes' (of varying size), and more significantly through the way in which they chose to name their businesses. Both tend to underestimate the trend towards diversification. Many merchants offered services which they did not advertise. Bowen and Pomeroy were probably typical. Their entry in the pink pages was basic and uninformative. From an advertisement which they placed in Sherrott's home builders' manual, however, it is clear that they sold a wide range of hardware as well as timber and joinery (Figure 12). It was also true that those merchants who did diversify did not necessarily change their name to show the fact. Even so, together they may be used to indicate the main periods of change. For this purpose I selected the pink pages for Melbourne in 1954, 1959, and 1964. I chose 1959 as the year of Hood's visit, as well as 1954, the peak of owner-building, and 1964 to provide an indicator of his impact (Lembke 1959). I also examined 1947 and 1969 to provide broader contextual information<sup>20</sup>

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18. Telephone conversation with Con Lembke, Sydney, 5 May 1997.

19. Trade directories provide similar listings but are less useful because, at least in the case of timber merchants, they contained less advertising. In smaller cities, such as Perth, for the early part of the postwar period the pink page listings include only those merchants who were willing to pay to be included. Incomplete, they are of very limited use.

20. I had intended to use 1949 as an earlier reference year, but the library on which I was relying (the National Library in Canberra) did not have 1949 or 1948.



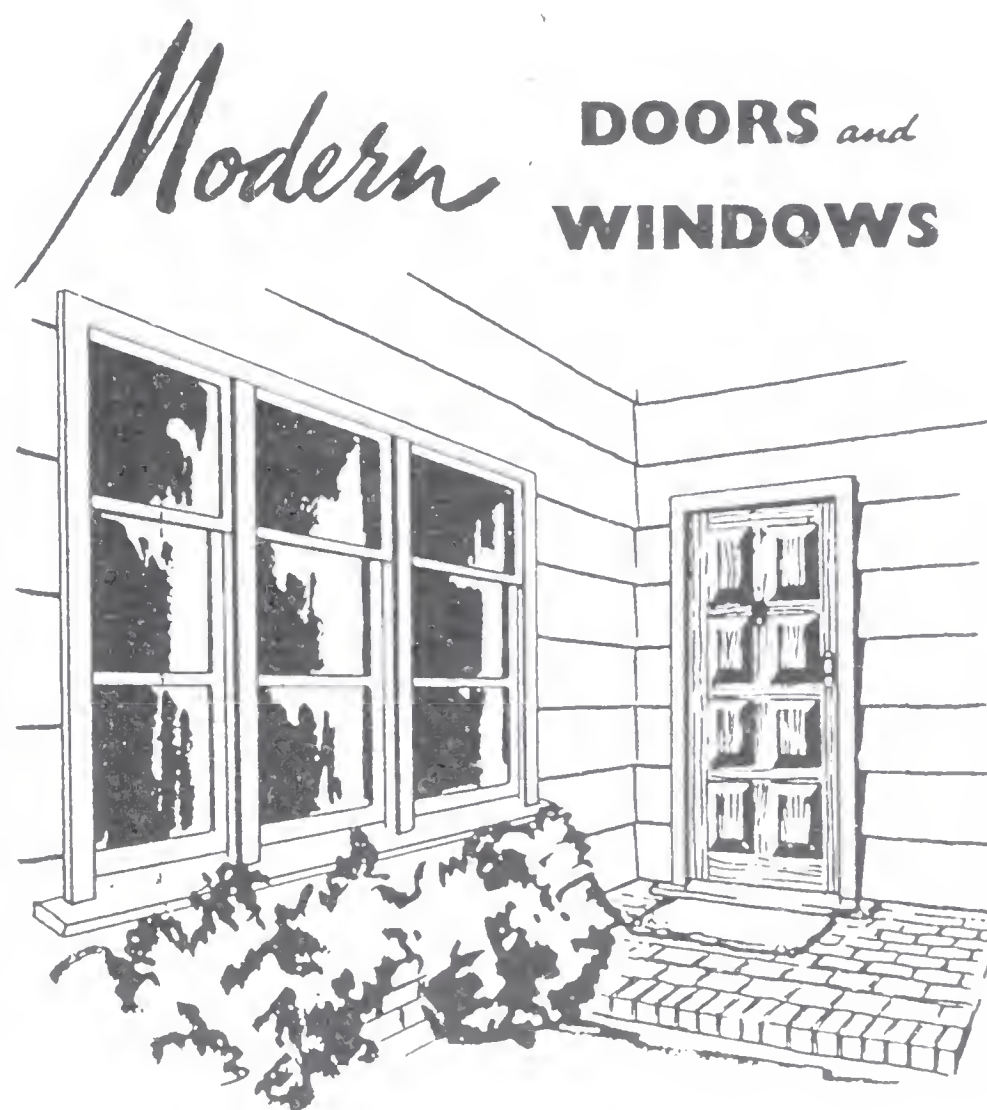
Since the late forties were a boom period, it is not surprising that the number of merchants listed in the Melbourne pink pages increased from 145 in 1947 to 213 in 1954, and that the rate of increase then slowed. By 1964 their number had peaked, and declined slightly thereafter. Very few merchants offered informative advertising in 1947, which might itself be indicative that they differed little in terms of the services they offered. The proportion who advertised rose to 14 per cent in 1954, and 17 per cent in 1959, at about which level it stabilized. Many advertisements informed the reader which merchants specialised in particular types of timber, joinery, and so forth, but a growing number pointed out those which stocked other types of materials, usually hardware. In 1954 seven out of thirty-one (22 per cent) specified hardware and/or other building supplies; by 1959 the number and proportion had about doubled to eighteen of forty-three (42 per cent), after which it rose again, slightly, to twenty of forty-two (47 per cent) in 1964. These advertisements suggest that, if anything, the major change in the direction of diversification came in the late 1950s, prior to Hood's workshop.

Judging from the way that merchants labelled themselves, however, 1959 emerges as a more significant date. In 1947 only two out of the 145 businesses listed as timber merchants in the Melbourne pink pages included 'hardware' in their name, and none referred more generally to 'building supplies'. The numbers increased to a total of six (including one 'building supplies') in 1954, and fourteen (three 'building supplies') in 1959, before jumping to twenty-seven (eight 'building supplies') in 1964. If their advertising suggests that those merchants who diversified did so most rapidly in the late 1950s, their names suggest that such diversification did not become part of their business image until the early 1960s. This makes sense. A careful retailer would experiment with new lines before changing his trading name. Together, they confirm that Hood solidified a trend that was already happening. More specifically, they suggest that his workshop fell roughly in the middle, rather than at the beginning, of the period of most rapid change.<sup>21</sup>

### *Which merchants diversified*

Telephone pink pages offer a picture of the overall pattern of change, but they tell us nothing about how merchants diversified: the varied calculations and responses of businessmen who found themselves in different situations, the stages by which they evolved, or the problems that they encountered. By far the best way of assessing this is to examine the cases that were recorded, sometimes in detail, in the pages of the *Timber Journal*. The usefulness of these case histories is limited in two ways. First, the journal did not begin to run such features until about 1957, and not consistently until 1959. Many of the articles that were published after this, however, contain contextual

21. The 1969 pink pages show little change in the pattern of advertising or names from 1964, indicating that the main trend towards diversification had occurred by the earlier year.



**Figure 12** Like many timber merchants, Bowen and Pomeroy purchased their own timber mills after World War II, experimented with the prefabrication of some timber building components, and slowly diversified their lines.

**Source:** Sherrott (c.1955), p.172.

Many home planners specify "Bowen Narroline" windows and "Craftbuilt" doors. These units are well designed, thoroughly dependable and keenly priced.

Bowen & Pomeroy supplies all timber, joinery and hardware requisites for home builders.

WRITE FOR OUR ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

**BOWEN & POMEROY  
PTY. LTD.**

**MACAULAY RD., NORTH MELBOURNE  
FJ9151 (6 lines)**

The "Bowen Narroline" double-hung window sashes — interior and exterior doors — plywood panels for dining-room — skirtings, architraves and mouldings used in the house described in this book were supplied by

**BOWEN & POMEROY PTY. LTD.**



material which outlines the historical development of specific companies, and in this manner they provide coverage of earlier years. The more serious limitation is that companies were featured because they were in some way exemplary. Those that were at the cutting edge of new practices are very well-represented; more traditional merchants, together with those that changed in a more evolutionary way, are largely absent. The bias is obvious. Nevertheless, the recorded experiences of the more progressive merchants tell us a good deal about changing conditions in the trade

Timber merchants were much more substantial members of their local communities than were builders, and were relatively permanent features of the retail landscape. Even so, as the pink pages show, a lot of new businesses were started in the decade after 1945. These were the most likely to recognise and address the needs of the emerging consumer market. Mainline Timber and Hardware of Dandenong, Victoria, were a case in point (Figure 13). In 1957 the *Timber Journal* published an account by a Canadian lumber company which had recently reoriented its business to 'the small buyer and amateur builder' by building drive-in facilities (Seaboard Lumber and Sales Company 1957). Immediately following this it ran an anonymous article, probably written by Con Lembke, which suggested that Mainline was in the forefront of the same trend in Australia.<sup>22</sup> Mainline was the 'first venture into the retail trade in Victoria of Timber Holdings Ltd', an umbrella company that was owned by several major metropolitan timber merchants, Gunnersens and Alstergrens in Victoria, and Le Messuriers in Adelaide.<sup>23</sup> The directors of Mainline had realised that 'the standard methods of merchandising wood were backward' ('Put Wood on a Pedestal...in Australia', 1957). Mainline had built an attractive showroom, was offering a wide range of building materials, and had advertised in the press, radio, and TV (which had only been available in Australia for a little over a year), all in an effort to appeal to consumers whose business, they reckoned, promised 'cash sales'. The writer took the opportunity to challenge his reader, asking pointedly 'as a timber merchant...have you a display showroom where an intending user can bring his wife to discuss the merits and appearance of weatherboard...etc. Or have you the usual unpainted office block, surrounded by timber stacks and noisy machinery?' ('Put Wood on a Pedestal...in Australia' 1957).

Older businesses, with an established contractor business, tended to stick to established ways. Newport Timbers in Melbourne is a case in point, which to this day functions in much the same way that it did in the early 1950s, and indeed in the 1920s, when it was established (Figure 14). In May 1997 it continued to sell various grades of hard- and soft-wood timber, which it could re-saw to customers' requirements. It carried a minimal amount of hardboard, and some basic hardware. A company price list from

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22. The authorship of many of the case histories recorded in the *Timber Journal* was not indicated, but most were probably written by Con Lembke

23. John Dargavel, personal communication.

the 1950s mentions only timber lines.<sup>24</sup> Businesses like Newport were most likely to make a change if new management took over, where contractor business was especially bad, or where consumer demand was especially strong. An example of new management was at Donoghoe and Hopkins in Queanbeyan, NSW. Established in 1937, with its own logging operations about forty miles away in Captain's Flat, and a re-saw mill in Queanbeyan, Donoghoe was a fairly typical merchant until 1951 when its management was taken over by E.W. Smith ('Donoghoe and Hopkins Pty. Ltd', 1954: 844; Timber Industry Personalities: E.W. Smith', 1955). Under Smith's leadership, it acquired the rights to distribute Hudson's kit homes, and opened a new retail shop in Canberra, where they sold hardware and paint as well as timber. It helped, of course, that opportunities were good in the Canberra area, which was expanding rapidly after the War. Within the A.C.T. itself building and planning regulations kept the rate of owner-construction below ten per cent, but many of the immigrants who were brought in for construction projects in the capital made their own homes in Queanbeyan. There, building regulations were lax and inspectors more willing to turn a blind eye to 'garage' homes ('Migrants Overcome...' 1951).



**Figure 13** In 1957, Mainline was one of the first companies in Australia to go after the consumer market by building attractive showrooms and stocking a wide range of building materials. It was established by a consortium of timber merchants in Melbourne and Adelaide.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal*, July 1957.

24. The present owner of the company was able to locate this price list among the papers on his office desk.





**Figure 14** Newport Timbers, Melbourne, is an example of continuity in the timber trade. It is a family business run by John Beecroft (centre) in much the same way as when his father founded it in the 1920s. It houses sawn timber (above), a small re-sawing operation (below), and limited quantities of other building materials and hardware.



**Source:** The author, 1997.



Opportunities were better still in the western suburbs of Sydney. One of the most rapidly-growing of Sydney's outer districts during the 1950s, and one where owner-building was exceptionally common, was Campbelltown. In the early 1950s a small local merchant, Harris Timber and Hardware, had an established contractor business ('Cambelltown Merchant Beats the Competition' 1961). At first Ron Harris competed for the contractor business, adding fibro, builders' hardware, and quantity estimating services, and fared well. Recognizing the potential of the consumer market, however, Harris moved his business to a larger site in 1957 and reorganised his yard layout. In 1959 he began to wholeheartedly seek the do-it-yourself business, opening a home improvement showroom and offering a roster of contractors to whom the less handy customers could be referred if necessary. By 1961, with a staff of fifty-two, his was one of the largest timber and hardware stores in the Sydney metropolitan area.

Harris was managing quite well even before branching out into the consumer market, and this was probably true for quite a few other merchants in rapidly-growing suburbs where demand was strong. In many other cases, however, and especially in older suburbs, merchants had to adapt simply to survive. J.K. Edwards Pty. was a case in point (Figure 15). Located in central Sydney, in 1952 they relied on the contractor trade ('Edwards Timber Shop...', 1955; 'Timber Basic Commodity...', 1960). The downturn in business of 1951/52 had hit them hard, and they were carrying a lot of builders on dubious credit. The owner decided to move to Ryde, a rapidly-growing suburb, where he added paint, kitchen cupboards, and ready-cut furniture to his lines, and remodelled his frontage, where he advertised his 'timber shop', 'the handyman's haunt.' Business boomed, and in 1959 Edwards opened a new store in Epping, another growing suburb, where 'the lady of the house makes 40 per cent of the shop purchases so she gets really good attention' ('Timber Basic Commodity...' 1960: 61).

Throughout the 1950s, these sorts of progressive merchants were the exception. The typical business did not change much. An established member of the local community for a generation or more, it continued to sell mostly timber. Along with their contractor business merchants saw a growing consumer trade, but they made no special effort to accommodate it. Among those that did change their ways were a disproportionate number that had only recently been established, or that had come under new management. These were most likely to be found in the outer suburbs where consumer demand was strongest, whether because they had first established there or because they had relocated simply in order to survive.

### *Stages of diversification, and the competition*

Those companies which did adapt and change tended to do so, like J.K. Edwards, in stages. Most had always carried some basic hardware. Few, however, had tried to compete wholeheartedly with dedicated general or builders' hardware stores, and so their first step was usually to expand their hardware lines, and to stock some of the larger timber substitutes, including



hardboard and, especially in the Sydney area, fibro. Thus in the late 1950s Brandon Timber Ltd, one of the largest sellers of hardwood scantling in the Brisbane area, took on a wide range of Burnie Board (a type of hardboard) as well as both Wunderlich and Hardie fibro, with the manufacturers providing their own display signs. It also expanded its limited offerings of hardware, established before World War II, by building a small hardware store which they hoped would attract both builder and handyman sales. Until that point barely ten per cent of their sales had been to consumers, but they expected their new hardware store to change this ('Brandon's New Brisbane Yard' 1961: 38). In a few cases, merchants opened hardware departments mainly in order to provide better service to commercial builders. Bowen and Pomeroy was a case in point (Twigg 1994: 69). Usually, however, this was an attempt to reach new customers. Thus in Hobart, when Risby's opened their first hardware store on Collins Street in 1958, they 'hoped [it] would be useful not only to the local builders but also the man in the street' (Graeme-Evans 1995: 241).

Hardware stores resented the new competition, and some retaliated by stocking packaged, pre-cut timber. They did not usually have the space to stock very much, and lacked the trade contacts to buy in bulk from importers.<sup>25</sup> They competed for the handyman rather than the owner-builder market. Doubtless they thought to sell small quantities of timber in the same way as timber merchants had always sold a few nails. Customers buying something else, or needing just a little, might pick it up for the convenience. During the 1950s, timber merchants did not think that this posed much of a threat to their business. Probably most agreed with J.K. Edwards that 'the now popular timber pack as sold by many hardware stores in the city will never create any severe competition to [the timber merchant's] business...as the customer is forced to take set lengths and sizes of timber which in most cases are more than are required and therefore most costly and wasteful' ('Timber Basic Commodity', 1960).

As the home improvement market took off in the 1960s, Edwards' skepticism about pre-packaged timber proved unfounded. In the early 1960s the Glenbervie Timber Co., of Essendon, Melbourne, moved aggressively into the consumer market, in particular by offering several of its better lines of timber in prepackaged form, advertising these as 'Instant Pick-up' (Melbourne Merchant... 1962: 18-19). The strategy worked well. By 1962 Glenbervie was selling more than half of its better, dressed and moulded timber in this way, and also distributing it to other merchants in the Melbourne area. The idea caught on. By 1965 Hyne was selling these packages to builders as well as consumers, and a year or so later when Burnie Timber Pty., also of Melbourne, began to make up large packages in fibreboard cartons they found that it was a 'big hit' (Looking at Hyne... 1965; 'New Timber Pack is Winner' 1968). Packaged timber had caught on.

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25. It is not clear whether, after the demise of the proposed Timber Mills scheme, hardware stores would have found it easier to obtain large quantities of timber directly from importers. Informal trade loyalties favoured existing patterns of timber distribution



and offered one means by which hardware merchants could broaden their lines. The alert timber merchant, however, could easily meet this sort of challenge. Other than by stocking a few packages of precut timber, in that era it does not seem that hardware stores made much effort to meet the challenge of the new-style timber merchant.



## EDWARDS TIMBER SHOP

*'THE HANDYMAN'S HAUNT'*

**Figure 15** In the early 1950s the Sydney merchant J.K. Edwards Pty. was a pioneer in following the new consumer market into the suburbs by relocating from a central site.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal*, June 1955.

Beyond stocking a wider range of material, the next step for the timber merchant was to make his operation more attractive to the consumer. At a basic level this meant sprucing up his yard. More significantly, it might mean changing the yard layout and opening a showroom. A leading example was Lloyds of Adelaide. It had been at the instigation of Ray Lloyd that Con Lembke had invited Art Hood to visit Australia, and it is not surprising that the author of an article about Lloyds, probably Lembke, claimed it to be the first in Australia about a business which was 'founded on the...principle of what a timber merchant should be — a trader with interests in practically all building materials who makes it as easy as possible for the consumer to buy



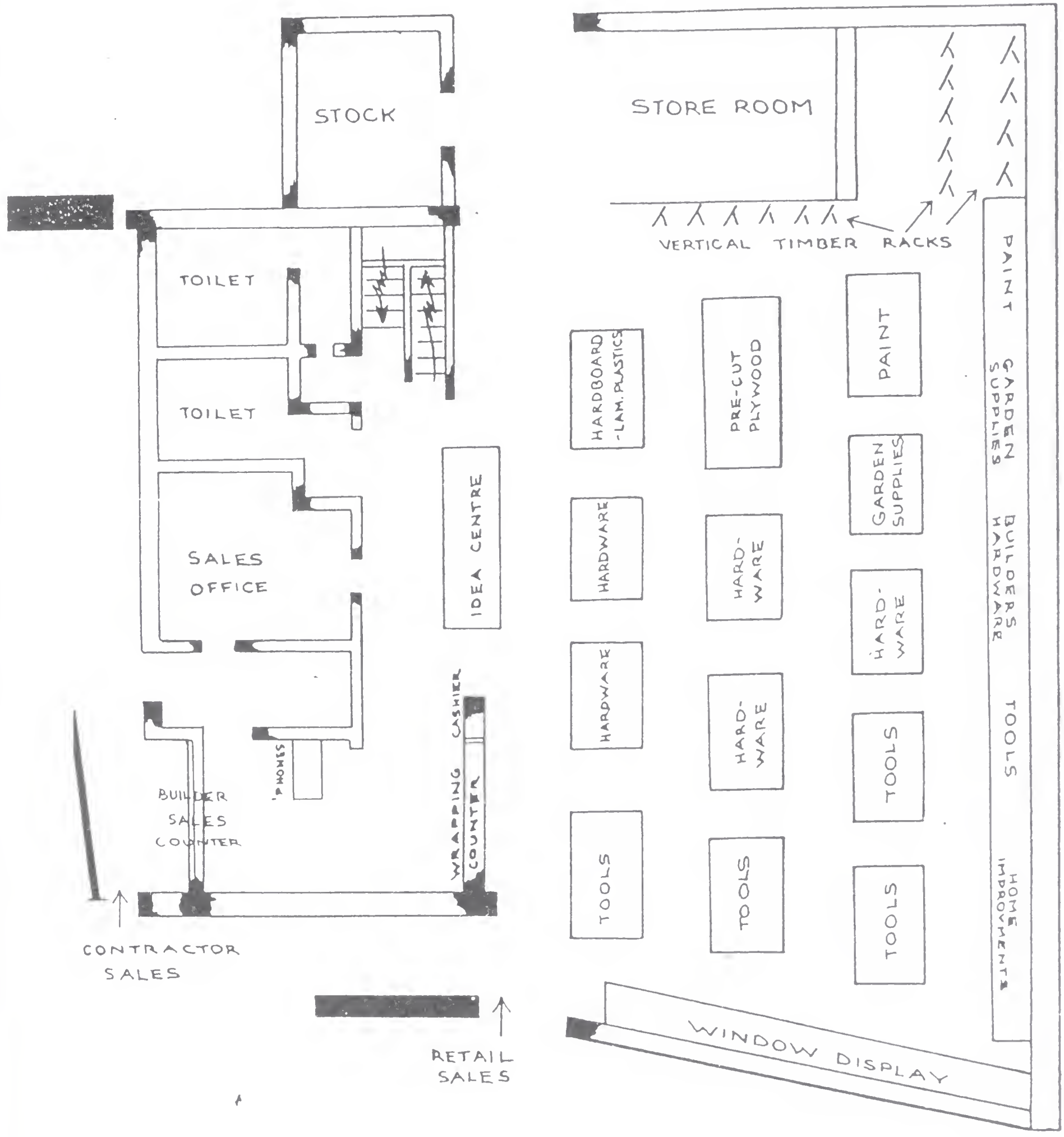
what he wants, either financed, on credit, or for cash' ('Merchant Operation Designed for Consumer Business', 1960). Even so it had only been in 1958 that Ray Lloyd, concerned that some builders were buying direct from mills while others were taking time to settle their accounts, came to believe that sales to consumers was the key. Like Edwards, he opened a new store in an outer suburb, St. Mary's, in order to be closer to his customers. There he designed a drive-through timber yard with under-cover loading, a ready-cut 'pavilion' with special racks for self-selection, a parking area, and a separate self-service showroom, with display stands, plywood and hardboard racks, vertical racks to take mouldings and laminated plastic sheets, an equipment rental section, and private office for Lloyds 'Bild-Account' clients. A large neon sign attached to the showroom helped draw in passing trade, and as a result ninety per cent of the sales at this particular store were to consumers. Lloyd had built and designed his store for consumers, and they came. Indeed, he made such a success of this type of operation that by 1968 he built a much larger suburban store. At thirty-thousand square foot it competed in size, and doubtless in many lines, with two adjacent department stores ('Lloyds Build...' 1968). In the early 1960s a number of other timber merchants began to make similar investments. One of the most aggressive of these was Bunnings in Western Australia. In June 1962 they opened a one-stop 'Super Centre' in Albany, and within the space of only sixteen months had a chain of ten stores (Mills 1986: 202). Evidently Bunnings believed that this new retail concept would work.

When merchants began to make their yards more appealing to consumers they had to make sure that they were in the right location (Canadian Western Lumber Company 1962: 22). It was not necessarily a question of opening a business in a rapidly-growing area. This was important in the early 1950s when the new home market absorbed most building materials, but as home improvements became more important towards the end of the decade it became possible even for those in quite central locations to do well. What was critical, however, was that merchants get away from the wharves and railyards around which they had tended to congregate. This sort of location worked well enough when their main customer was the contractor, but even quite keen DIY'ers might be reluctant to go there, and they certainly would not catch passing trade.

Just as merchants irritated hardware merchants when they diversified their lines, they ran the risk of alienating contractors when they so obviously began to pander to the consumer. Indeed, this became a contentious issue among merchants.<sup>26</sup> To some extent this could be handled by designing new showroom stores carefully so as to accommodate both types of customer. When Hayman and Ellis, a Sydney merchant, diversified their business by expanding into consumer sales in 1960, they were careful not to alienate contractors, who made up eighty per cent of their business ('Sydney Merchant Diversifies', 1961). Contractors and consumers were provided with separate entrances to the new store, and the contractors' entrance led easily to an office dedicated for consultations (Figure 16).

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26. Telephone conversation with Con Lembke, Sydney, 27 June 1997.



**Figure 16** To attract consumers, timber merchants had to stock more lines and lay out attractive showrooms. At the same time many wished to retain their contractor business. Hayman and Ellis, a Sydney merchant, solved this difficulty by providing separate trade and retail sales facilities.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal and Building Products Merchandiser*, April 1961.



Merchants like Harris ran greater risks when they took the further step of offering 'one-stop' package deals that included optional contracting services. How contractors responded would depend in part on how the package deal was arranged, but also on how it was presented (Bellmaine 1960a: 21). Preferring not to run the risk of alienating their contractor customer many merchants, like Thatcher and Oberg in Sydney, steered clear of the issue. ('Timber Industry Enters the Home Improvement Field' 1959: 68). Others, however, at least made an initial foray into this area of business. The arrangement that was potentially the most profitable for the merchant was for him to become, in effect, the general contractor on jobs that his store generated. In that way he retained full control of all aspects of the sale, an issue that Art Hood emphasized at his workshops in 1959 (Lembke 1959). The problem of course was that contractors were likely to resent being relegated to subcontracting, or perhaps being cut out altogether. The more palatable alternative was the one offered by Harris: the merchant acted, in effect, as an agent, directing consumers to a list of approved contractors. The merchant could then choose whether to offer some sort of guarantee to the customer. A potential difficulty was that although those contractors on the list stood to gain, those that were excluded might take their business elsewhere. Harris acknowledged that at first some contractors had been suspicious of his one-stop plan, and that he had lost the business of one, but in time he was able to regain the lost customer and to get his plan running smoothly ('Campbelltown Merchant...' 1961: 33).

Whether merchants attempted, and succeeded, in establishing one-stop contracting services depended a good deal on their size and management expertise. Most merchants had no experience at estimating, and unless they were both willing and able to take this seriously they were likely to regret the effort.<sup>27</sup> A very large merchant like Harris, operating in an area with plenty of business, was in the ideal position to make a go of it. He had management resources, estimating experience, and a good deal of leverage over local contractors. There was enough business to guarantee a reasonable living to almost everyone. Smaller merchants in tighter markets might not fare as well. Significantly, in one of the few negative articles that the *Timber Merchant* ran on the subject of consumer sales, the unfortunate experience of a failed one-stop program was briefly summarised ('Merchant Discontinues...' 1961). The merchant in question had established a roster of builders, apparently without difficulty, but then found that too many proved unreliable. In what was evidently a small operation, he found himself spending too much time troubleshooting with contractors, leaving him with insufficient time for his store operation. He abandoned the scheme. Even companies as large as Risby's experienced difficulties in this area (Graeme-Evans 1995: 279). It was because of these sorts of difficulties that in 1963 Lembke arranged for another American, Herb Richheimer, to offer a workshop to Australian merchants. Richheimer, the president of a consulting firm in New York, gave advice on how to make the home improvement

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27 I am indebted for this point to Con Lembke. Telephone conversation with Con Lembke. Sydney, 27 June 1997.

market more profitable. His tips were well-received, and doubtless many merchants benefitted (Lembke 1963). Eventually, many merchants diversified to some degree, and quite a few went further than that, but very few extended their services to include contracting.

### *Coming to 'Terms'*

Apart from contracting, the service which merchants found most difficult to provide was consumer credit. When their contractor customers numbered, at most, in dozens, merchants could quite readily assess the risk of lending to each. Most contractors were 'regulars.' But hundreds and indeed thousands of consumers might patronise a timber yard in any given year, and it was very difficult for merchants to decide whether, to whom, and on what terms, they should provide credit. Yet one of Hood's most insistent messages in 1959 was that offering 'terms' was critical to increasing consumer sales.

One way out of this dilemma was provided by the development of financial institutions that were specialised in the provision of credit for the purchase of building supplies. These emerged in the late 1950s, mainly to serve the home improvement market. The first appears to have been the Property Improvement Acceptance Corporation, based in Melbourne. This company was formed in 1955 after a consumer survey had shown that the main barrier to expansion of the home improvement market was the almost complete unavailability of finance. According to John Redrup (1960a: 21), its joint Managing Director, in 1957 the PAIC was approached by 'progressive timber and hardware interests in Melbourne' to extend credit for the purchase of materials. They did so, and with considerable success. By 1958 the company had approved forty timber and hardware stores, effectively as agents of PAIC credit. This number rose rapidly, reaching two hundred by the beginning of 1960, and three hundred and fifty only six months later (Redrup 1960b: 73). Bad debts were apparently uncommon, and the business was sufficiently profitable that by 1960 several other companies had entered the field, at least in Victoria and New South Wales.

It is not clear that the provision of credit was a response to consumer demand. Certainly, Australians were taking on much more hire purchase debt in the late 1950s (Whitwell 1989). On the face of it, Redrup (1960b: 81) made a plausible case to timber merchants when he argued in the *Timber Journal* that 'competitor industries make it easy for the public to buy; and easy buying is the secret of easy selling.' (original emphasis) (Figure 17). In practise, however, even the more progressive merchants did not report that consumers were demanding credit (Figure 18). Jim Edwards, who had opened his 'handyman's haunt' in 1955, could speak from some experience when, in 1960, he observed that although he had sold some materials on terms consumers had to be 'educated' to the idea ('Timber Basic Commodity...' 1960:66). Redrup (1960b: 76) acknowledged the point when he emphasized that 'terms — like timber — must be sold.' Certainly his company was well aware that both timber merchants and contractors needed encouragement. He and an associate had already written a series of articles



for the *Timber Journal* which spelled out how and why merchants should promote instalment purchases (Redrup 1959; Bellmaine 1959; 1960a; 1960b; 1960c). One of these gave detailed instructions as to how merchants might win over recalcitrant contractors (Bellmaine 1960b). If marketing involves the art of persuasion, it was not just the timber merchant who needed to be persuaded.



**Terms Means Cash To You.  
Customers Will Buy More Materials.**

**Figure 17** Following Art Hood's workshop, in 1959-60 the *Australian Timber Journal* ran a series of articles that encouraged dealers to sell "on terms". Unlike their American counterparts, it seems that Australians still needed some encouragement, though they were learning fast.

**Source:** *Australian Timber Journal and Building Products Merchandiser*, Jan. 1960.

**MERCHANDISING**

# £1,000,000 TO LEND NOW!

We Are Your . . . . .



**Home  
Improvement  
Centre**

**NO DEPOSIT**

- ★ Your kitchen can be completely modernised for as little as 18/9 weekly.
- ★ Have that extra space in your home. Let us "add-a-room" for as low as 12/6 per week.
- ★ Your car needs a garage. We will build one complete for as little as 19/9 per week.
- ★ How about a beautifully polished timber feature wall in your living room, yours for a few shillings weekly.
- ★ You can have a modern bathroom complete for only 18/9 per week.

OPEN SATURDAY MORNING, 7.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m.

**DO IT YOURSELF!**

YOU CAN BUY ALL THE MATERIAL FOR THESE JOBS FOR NO DEPOSIT AND A FEW SHILLINGS WEEKLY TO SUIT YOU

★ Remember — No Deposit

RING UY3251 and our rep. will call

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165 CANTERBURY ROAD, BANKSTOWN

Spring's Comin'



**REMODEL NOW**



**... PAY LATER**

Renew your home this spring. Build a patio, an extra room, add a garage or modernise your bathroom. Spring is the perfect time to remodel because the weather and the prices are right. But before you begin any home improvement job, come see us for free advice. We're specialists in all types of remodelling and we'll be glad to get you started right.

**FREE ESTIMATES**

OF THE MATERIALS NEEDED

AND EXTENDED TERMS TO SUIT YOUR POCKET

Open Your

BECK'S "BILD-ACCOUNT"

NOW!!

This advertisement of Beck & Co. Timber Pty. Ltd. is typical of the full and half page advertisements now appearing in Sydney suburban papers. It is reproduced here in half reduction.

**Figure 18** Timber merchants did not encourage sales "on terms" until it became possible for them to refer customers to companies that specialized in the provision of credit for home improvements.

Source: *Australian Timber Journal and Building Products Merchandiser*, Dec. 1959.



## 6 The Changed Significance of the Timber Merchant

In response to a combination of pressures, between 1945 and the mid-1960s, the role of the timber merchant had changed. Slowly at first, but then with gathering momentum from the mid-1950s onwards, he became less a retailer of timber to the building industry and increasingly a marketer of building supplies to a wider consumer trade. This shift had a significant impact, both upon builders and also upon consumers. Some of these effects were intended and predictable, but others were not.

### *The owner-builder and home improver*

As timber merchants responded to the needs of amateurs by providing a wider range of goods and services they made it progressively easier for amateurs to build. Of course there were many others who were willing to provide information and advice, whether in the form of books (Domus 1954; Sharp 1946; Lloyd 1957; Sherrott c.1955; Topham 1952), annuals (Home Builders Annual), or booklets (Home Builders' Advisory Bureau 1946). For a time, between 1953 and about 1958, even the New South Wales Housing Commission ran a Home Builders' Bureau which offered advice to 'the many inexperienced persons desirous of building their own homes but lacking the necessary knowledge or access to expert guidance' (Housing Commission of New South Wales 1954: 31). In 1954 they received 70-80 requests a week; by 1956 the rate had doubled, but by 1958 was beginning to tail off, presumably because fewer people were choosing to build their own homes. The most important source, however, because they were read by many thousands of people, were consumer magazines such as *Australian House and Garden* and *Australian Home Beautiful*. These offered up-to-date tips on materials, tools, construction techniques, and indeed on how to identify a good timber merchant! (Mitchell and Gaynor 1950). Perhaps because Australian timber merchants were slower off the mark in offering information than were the North American lumber dealers, Australia's consumer magazines seem to have been more resolutely directed at the DIY consumer. *Australian Home Beautiful* styled itself 'The Magazine of Practical Living' and then, from 1954, 'Australia's How-To-Do-It-Magazine.' Its American namesake was less practical, more concerned to help its readers consume, rather than make.<sup>28</sup> There had never been a period when so much information about building materials and methods was made so readily available.

The materials themselves were another matter. There were not so many places where amateurs could buy all their materials, and in this regard by the early 1960s timber merchants had assumed a clear leadership role. By making DIY easier they might have drawn some business away from

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28. Given that owner-building peaked at different times in the United States and Australia, the relevant comparison is between the character of American magazines in about 1951 with those of Australian magazines about four years later. Comparison is complicated by the fact that there were more consumer magazines in the United States, including one or two devoted wholly to the home handyman.

contractors, as indeed some of those in the building industry feared. In most cases, however, they probably facilitated home improvements which otherwise would not have occurred. They actively helped Australians to make more livable homes.

Although important, the impact of the merchant was much more limited than it might have been. Apart from those who moved into the kit business, few made any special effort to accommodate the needs of consumers during the boom in owner-building of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Undoubtedly they supplied most of the timber that owner-builders used, but on their own terms. They had a more substantial impact on the home improvement market which became important in the late 1950s. By that time, many were in a position to take advantage of this new type of consumer demand, and a few were in a position to shape it, most notably by promoting the use of credit. It was only by the mid-1960s, however, that a substantial minority were attuned to, and capable of influencing, a new market.

### *The building industry*

As merchants began to direct their energies elsewhere, it might seem that they would come to have less significance for commercial builders, their traditional market. In relation to the new breed of large, project builders this is probably true, although some of the latter did take advantage of the services of truss manufacturers from the early 1960s onwards. Small and moderate-sized companies continued to dominate the building industry, however, and for these the merchants became, if anything, more rather than less important.

During the 1950s there was a steady convergence in the methods and needs of both owner-builders and small contractors. This is apparent in many ways. It was recognised, for example, in advice manuals. In 1957, for example, Lloyd (1957: 3) published his *Help for Home Builders* which he suggested would be of interest to the 'tradesman starting out to build on his own, or to the amateur who is building by employing subcontractors, or be of special value to the amateur who is actually doing the building work himself.' One of the most important developments was the rapid diffusion of lightweight power tools. These soon became affordable for almost everyone and, by making on-site work easier, they reduced the importance of differences in skill (Boyd 1958: 21). Increasingly, the manufacturers of tools targetted them indifferently at both amateurs and tradesmen. In 1959 Parken was claiming that their work bench had been 'designed for the tradesman and the handyman'; Mitchell's 'Multimaster' universal woodworking machine was available in different sizes 'for the home workshop, builder, and production shop' but each did essentially the same tasks.<sup>29</sup> As early as 1953 Black and Decker was advertising its new 'Lectro' circular saw to the handman, using testimonials from professional builders such as B. Van der Meulen of Springwood, who commented that the 'Lectro-Saw has proved a

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29. Advertisements in *Australian Home Beautiful* 38,8 (Aug. 1959), pp. 70, 74.



very profitable asset...on account of its extreme versatility and portability...'.<sup>30</sup> (Figure 3). The following year the company promoted its new '44 Sander' as being appropriate for carpenters, cabinet makers, painters, boat builders, and repair men, as well as 'home craftsmen'.<sup>31</sup>

Faced with these new tools, amateurs, tradesman and small builders made essentially the same sorts of calculations. Soon after the Lectro saw came out, Raymond Tilley bought one to help in framing a house in Launceston, Tasmania. He later reported that it was 'one of the greatest labour-saving and generally useful investments we ever made', since stud cutting and halving took days instead of weeks (Tilley 1955). The dialogue of time and investment was one which a tradesman would have understood. The parallels could hardly have been made more explicit when in 1959 Eric Wilson offered advice to readers of *Home Beautiful* as to whether they should purchase several small tools, or an expensive, all purpose machine such as the Shopsmith (Figure 19). He pointed out that it was cheaper to buy one all-purpose machine than a series of smaller, more specialised tools, and also that the machine occupied less space, a consideration when new houses might cost about three pounds ten shillings a square foot. On the other hand, he advised buyers to consider the time that would be required in rejigging the machine and its accessories for different tasks. As he pointed out, however, 'lost time on this can be cut through planning of work' (Wilson 1981: 81). It is hard to imagine a clearer statement of the way that a carpenter-builder might have weighed his options. As hardware and department stores began to market power tools, therefore, they helped the amateur and small builder alike.

Most merchants did not sell power tools, but as they adapted to serve the other needs of consumers they also, incidentally, helped the small builder too. In 1957, the Seaboard Lumber Company of Vancouver pointed out to readers of the *Timber Journal* that for some years it had been offering a range of services to consumers, including drive-in facilities. It then noted that 'these same sales devices have been found to appeal to professional builders, contractors and architects' who are 'no less impressionable' (Seaboard Lumber Sales Co. 1957: 72). If they were impressionable it was because they found these services useful. When Whitakers diversified their operation in Dee Why, Sydney, to cater to consumers they found that their servicing of contractors had also improved ('Whitakers One Stop ...' 1960: 38). The same thing happened at Hayman and Ellis. Indeed a local builder, the President of the Master Builders Association of New South Wales, Manly-Warringah branch, commented that those builders who had been accustomed to buying timber from Hayman and Ellis, but had had to go elsewhere for hardware would appreciate 'the new convenience' which 'will save the builder a lot of time and money' ('Sydney Merchant Diversifies' 1961: 23). Merchants improved their contractor service more often than they intended.

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30. Advertisement in *Australian Home Beautiful* 32,7 (July 1953), p.30.

31. Advertisement in *Australian Home Beautiful* 33,4 (Apr.1954).





*Shopsmith is far  
Cheaper than  
Single Purpose  
Machines*

## 5 BASIC MACHINES

### HUNDREDS OF APPLICATIONS

**A POWER WORKSHOP** equal in quality and capacity to expensive machines. SHOPSMITH is easy to operate and converts from one tool to another in UNDER 60 SECONDS! Requires only 2' x 5' floor space. Weighs only 200 lb.

**CAPACITY!** Far greater capacity than machines of comparable size.

**QUALITY!** Four grease sealed ball bearings; induction hardened spindle tip; centreless ground steel ways; hairline accuracy; lifetime service.

CALL FOR A DEMONSTRATION  
OR RETURN COUPON FOR  
INFORMATION.



500 BOURKE STREET, MELBOURNE, C.1.  
Opp. Menzies — Phone: M1566.  
AND 50 ESPLANADE, DEVONPORT, TASMANIA.

Please post particulars of the SHOPSMITH

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

H.B.8

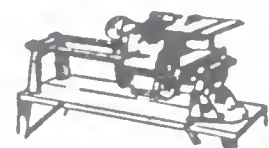
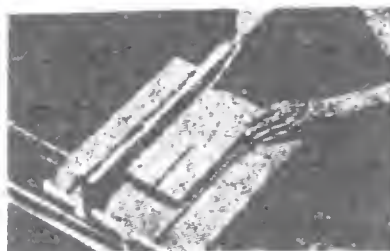
# SHOPSMITH

## THE NEW POWER TOOL

**A Complete  
Power Workshop...**

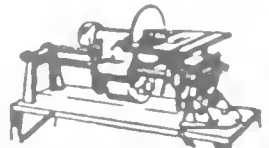
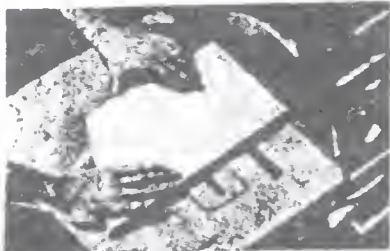
**For Profit  
or Pleasure**

### 1—8" CIRCULAR SAW



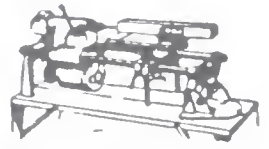
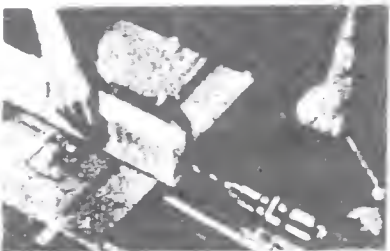
Depth of cut 2 1/4". Big 14 1/2" x 17" tilting table. Greater capacity—cuts to center of 8' plywood panels. Unique microquill adjustment for accurate cutting.

### 2—12" DISC SANDER



More working space. Extra features. Disc can be fed into work for safety and accuracy. Miter gauge and rip fence for easier squaring, mitering and joining.

### 3—HORIZONTAL DRILL



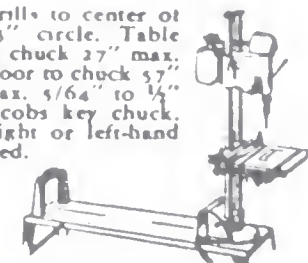
Only SHOPSMITH has it. Extremely useful when drilling or mortising large, heavy pieces. No need for jigs. Permanently grease-sealed ball-bearing action.

### 4—33" WOOD LATHE



33" between centers. 15" swing. 4" quill feed. Speeds 875 to 3500 rpm. Finger-tip adjustable tool rest always slides parallel to work, locks in any position.

### 5—VERTICAL DRILL PRESS



Drills to center of 15" circle. Table to chuck 27" max. Floor to chuck 57" max. 5/64" to 1/4" Jacobs key chuck. Right or left-hand feed.

Figure 19 The Shopsmith was one of the most versatile and expensive of power tools, designed for amateurs and tradesman alike. Timber merchants also served types of business. Such tools and services made it possible for amateurs and small builders to compete with large, speculative builders such as A.V.Jennings.

Source: *Australian Home Beautiful*, August, 1953.



By reducing builders' costs, merchants helped to make the industry as a whole more efficient. Their greatest impact was upon the small builder. Large builders were increasingly taking their custom elsewhere, buying timber directly from sawmills, and running their own building supply operations. They also did some of their own pre-cutting, although as late as the mid-1960s about half relied on merchants for this (Walsh 1972: 28). Small builders were not in a position to do any of these things, and relied upon merchants to provide each of these services as efficiently as possible. As merchants started to diversify their lines, made trusses and pre-hung doors, and also pre-cut wall assemblies, it was above all the small builder who gained. As timber merchants changed in the postwar era, one of the more important side effects was to help the small builder remain competitive with his larger counterparts. Increasingly, then, merchants helped to foster diversity in a building industry which came to include amateur enthusiasts as well as small local contractors and the large project builders like Jennings.

## 7 Conclusions

Almost everyone who has written about the postwar building industry has acknowledged the importance of mortgage lenders, while the direct impact of the builder himself is fairly obvious, if not always well-understood. In this paper I have shown that building suppliers such as the Australian timber merchant also played a vital role, helping to shape both the technical and the social organisation of the industry. Michael Ball has argued that we should pay closer attention to those enterprises that were involved in the construction industry, and that in so doing we might usefully set aside notions, still prevalent, about the industry's inefficiency. This account of the Australian timber merchant bears out his argument. Already, in the late 1940s, the merchants provided services, notably credit and information, which made the industry more efficient. Subsequently, they helped the industry to adapt to quite rapid technological change, not least by assisting the amateur builder. It is clear that future accounts of the building industry, both theoretical and empirical, will have to pay more attention to the building supply dealer.

The fact remains that the Australian timber merchant did not respond as quickly as he might to the challenges of the postwar era. He did not properly address the legitimate concerns of his traditional contractor customers about timber quality and price. For many years he also failed to recognise, and to respond to, the business opportunities that were offered by a burgeoning consumer market. It will not do to explain his inertia in generic terms, as simply one more manifestation of the conservatism of the building industry. After all, in North America lumber dealers adapted more quickly after 1945 even though, in terms of levels of owner-building for example, opportunities were no better. Some part of the difference might be explained by the fact that the business culture of Australia in this period was less aggressively competitive than that, in particular, of the United States. Lumber dealers could no longer contemplate the sorts of restrictive practises

which the Australian merchant attempted in the mid-1950s. Moreover, popular acceptance of consumer credit developed more slowly in Australia, with particular consequences for the timber merchant. The decisive difference, however, was the greater degree of vertical integration in the Australian timber trade. When merchants were closely tied to producers they were naturally reluctant to diversify. Informed observers like Con Lembke, and visitors like Art Hood, urged the merchants to go to market, but for some years their traditional trade linkages held them back. As with us all, their specific history framed their response to changing conditions.



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